

Head lice

Head lice are tiny insects that live in human hair. They are common in children.

Head lice are smaller than a pinhead when they are born. They grow to about the size of a sesame seed.

They cannot fly, jump or swim. They spread by climbing from the hair of one person to another.

Head lice are not caused by dirty hair or poor hygiene. All types of hair can get head lice, no matter how long the hair is or if it is in good condition.

Head lice cannot be passed on to animals or be caught from them.

Itching

Head lice often make your child's head itch.

The itch is caused by an allergy to the lice. As not everyone has an allergy to head lice, your child might not know that they have caught them. For other people, it can take up to three months before the itching starts.

In some cases, a rash may appear on the back of the neck.

How to spot head lice

Head lice can be difficult to see, even when you are looking closely. You may be able to see the eggs –which are the size of a pinhead – but sometimes you can see these even after you have killed all the lice.

To find out if the lice are still active, you need to find a live louse using a comb.

You need a special fine-toothed head lice comb with teeth between 0.2mm and 0.3mm apart. It works best on wet hair. When you comb the hair, lice will be caught on the comb.

How common are head lice?

Head lice are very common, particularly in children aged four to 11.

One in three children in the UK will get head lice at some point each year.

Treatment

Wet combing

Wet combing is the best way to get rid of head lice. You do not need to visit your GP.

You need a special fine-toothed comb. You can get this at your local pharmacy. The teeth of the comb should be between 0.2mm and 0.3mm apart.

You need to:

- Wash the hair using ordinary shampoo
- Apply lots of conditioner
- Untangle the hair with a normal comb
- Get the fine-toothed comb and brush from the hair roots
- Make sure the comb runs from the scalp right to the ends of the hair
- Every time you get to the bottom of the hair, check the comb for lice
- Remove any lice by wiping or rinsing the comb.
- Work through the hair, section by section, so that the whole head is combed
- Rinse out the conditioner
- Repeat the combing through all your child's hair

You should repeat these steps every three days for more than two weeks. This makes sure you get all of the lice as they hatch. You can only get rid of all of the lice if you wet comb carefully and regularly.

Lotions or sprays

There are lotions and sprays available to kill head lice. These only work if they are used correctly and thoroughly. There is no need to visit your GP if you need a lotion or spray as your pharmacist will be able to recommend a product and give you advice about how to use it correctly.

Preventing head lice

It is difficult to prevent head lice because they spread so easily.

Regular combing with the head louse comb – for example, once a week – is the best way to find new lice quickly. Then you can treat again with wet combing when it is needed.

Lotions and sprays do not prevent head lice and **should only be used if a live louse has been found** on you, or your child's, head.

Head lice are not a reason to keep your child off school or out of nursery.