# Head lice: the truth and the myths

Head lice are small insects with six legs. They are often said to be “as large as a match head”; in fact, they are often not much bigger than a pin head and rarely bigger than a sesame seed (the seeds on burger buns). They live on, or very close to the scalp and don’t wander far down the hair shafts for very long. The louse’s mouth is like a very small needle. It sticks this into the scalp and drinks the blood. They can only live on human beings; you can’t catch them from animals.

Nits are not the same thing as lice. Lice are the insects that move around the head. Nits are egg cases laid by lice, which are glued onto hair shafts; they are smaller than a pin head and are pearly white. If you have nits it doesn’t always mean that you have head lice. When you have got rid of all the lice, the nits will stay stuck to the hair until it grows out. You only have head lice if you can find a living, moving louse (not a nit) on the scalp.

Anybody can get head lice, but they are much rarer in adults. Head louse infection is a problem of the whole community, not just the schools. Infection is common during school holidays as well as during term time. Parents start to worry more about lice when children go back to school because they think the lice are being caught there. A lot of head louse infections are caught from close family and friends in the home and community, not from the school. It’s not just children who have head lice; adults get them too. It’s often said that head lice prefer clean, short hair. In fact, they probably don’t much care whether hair is dirty or clean, short or long.

Head lice can walk from one head to another when the heads are touching for some time. You are very unlikely to pick up head lice from brief contact with other people. The longer you have head-to-head contact with someone who has lice, the more likely it is you will get them too. They can’t swim, fly, hop or jump. The idea that they can jump may have come from the fact that, when dry hair is combed, a head louse caught on the teeth of the comb is sometimes flicked off by static electricity (this is one reason why detection combing should be done with the hair damp). You don’t get them from objects such as chair backs. Although it’s just possible that a louse might get from one head to another if a hat is shared, this is very unlikely.

If you catch two or more lice, they may breed and increase slowly in number. At this stage, most people don’t have any symptoms and won’t know they have lice unless they look very carefully for them. For the first two or three months, there is usually no itch, but then the scalp may start to itch badly. This is due to an allergy, not to the louse bites themselves. Most people only realise they have head lice when this itch starts. By then they’ve had lice on their head for two or three months without knowing it. In most infections, there aren’t more than a dozen or so lice on the scalp at any one time. Some people never get the itch, including adults. They may have a few lice on their heads for years without knowing it and can pass them to other people. Louse droppings may fall on to the pillow during the night. Pillows may then get dirty more quickly than usual.

Combing is an important part of good personal care but head lice are not easily damaged by it. Good hair care may help to spot lice early and so help to control them. There is no evidence that the old slogans “break its legs, so it can’t lay eggs” or “a legless louse is an eggless louse” have any truth in them. The best way to stop infection is for families to learn how to check their own heads. This way they can find any lice before they have a chance to breed. They can then treat them and stop them going round the family. The way to check heads is called “detection combing”. It can be done as often as families want to.

# Head lice: detection combing – how to do it

Adapted from Public Health Medicine Environmental Group (PHMEG) published guidance

* You need: Plastic detection comb (from the pharmacist), good lighting, ordinary comb
* Wash the hair well and then dry it with a towel. The hair should be damp
* Make sure there is good light
* Comb the hair with an ordinary comb
* Then comb with the teeth of the detection comb touching the skin of the scalp at the top of the head. Keeping in contact with the scalp as long as possible, draw the comb carefully towards the edge of the hair
* Look carefully at the teeth of the comb in good light
* Do this over and over again from the top of the head to the edge of the hair in all directions, working round the head. Do this for several minutes. It takes 10 to 15 minutes to do it properly for each head
* If there are head lice, you will find one or more lice on the teeth of the comb. Head lice are little insects with moving legs. They are often not much bigger than a pin head, but may be as big as a sesame seed (the seeds on burger buns)
* Clean the comb under the tap. A nail brush helps to do this
* Notes You can buy a plastic detection comb from the pharmacist. Many combs sold as louse detection and removal combs are unsuitable for the purpose. Only those with flat-faced, parallel-sided teeth less than 0.3mm apart are appropriate
* If you need help and advice, ask your local pharmacist, health visitor, school nurse or family doctor. Don’t treat unless you are sure that you have found a living, moving louse

# How to treat head lice

Public Health Medicine Environmental Group (PHMEG) published guidance on

* Don’t treat unless you are sure you have found a living, moving louse
* Never use head louse lotions on your family “just in case”. It’s never a good idea to use chemicals if they aren’t really needed
* If you are sure you have found a living louse: check the heads of all the people in your home
* Only treat those who have living, moving lice. Treat them all at the same time with a head lice lotion (not shampoo). Ask your local pharmacist, health visitor or family doctor which lotion to use and how long to leave it on. Always follow manufacturer’s instructions when applying a lotion
* Put the lotion on to dry hair. Use the lotion in a well-ventilated room or in the open air
* Part the hair near the top of the head, put a few drops on to the scalp and rub it in. Part the hair a bit further down the scalp and do the same again
* Do this over and over again until the whole scalp is wet. With long hair you don’t need to apply lotion down any further than where you would put a ponytail band (except when applying Dimeticone which should fully cover hair)
* Use enough lotion – at least one small bottle for each head and more if the hair is thick
* Use all the lotion up
* Keep the lotion out of the eyes and off the face. One way is to hold a cloth over the face. Let the lotion dry on the hair. Some lotions can catch fire, so keep well away from flames, cigarettes, stoves and other sources of heat
* Don’t use a hair dryer
* Repeat the treatment in seven days’ time for all of those receiving the first treatment
* Check all the heads a day or two after the second treatment. If you still find living, moving lice, ask your local pharmacist, health visitor or family doctor for advice