

Head lice

Head lice are mostly spread by head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice. Having head lice is not a sign of being dirty. Head lice do not carry or spread diseases. Anyone can catch head lice at any age, but they most often affect children. Ask a pharmacist how to find and treat head lice.

Head lice are wingless, crawling insects that live on human heads. They cannot live off the human head for more than a day or two. Head lice live in the hair and feed on human blood by sucking it from the scalp. Their bites can be itchy. Female head lice lay their eggs close to the scalp, on hair strands. The most common spots are behind the ears and along the back of the neck. The eggs are glued to the hair strands and hatch in about seven days. The eggs are also called nits.

Signs and symptoms

Lice are 2–3 mm long and often match your hair colour. They appear lighter in blonde hair and darker in black hair.

Signs of head lice are:

- an itchy scalp (caused by an allergic reaction to lice saliva)
- moving lice on the scalp or hair

- small, pale eggs stuck to the bases of hair strands. The eggs can't be moved easily
- skin sores caused by scratching. These can become infected.

Head lice do not always cause itching or other symptoms, so you need to search for them.



Finding head lice

You can find lice and eggs by wet combing (also called the 'conditioner and comb' method):

- Apply enough hair conditioner to cover each hair strand from root to tip. Apply the conditioner evenly and detangle the hair using an ordinary comb. You can apply conditioner to dry or wet hair. Hair conditioner makes it hard for lice to crawl or cling to hair. You can use any type of hair conditioner.
- Divide the hair into 3–4cm sections. Start at the scalp and comb each section using a fine-tooth lice comb.
- After each stroke, wipe the conditioner off the comb onto a paper towel and look for lice and eggs. Remove all eggs and lice from the comb after each stroke.
- Repeat the combing at least twice for every part of the head, then rinse the hair well.

You can also use battery-operated electronic lice combs to find lice. Electronic combs are used on dry hair. Pharmacies sell electronic and other lice combs.

Removing head lice

Head lice combs

Head lice can sometimes be removed by wet combing. You must wet comb the hair every second day until no lice or eggs are found for ten days in a row. You can also remove head lice by using an electronic lice comb.

Head lice products

You can remove head lice with products that kill them. These products are available as hair shampoos, mousses, conditioners, lotions and sprays. The active ingredient of most products is from one of the following five groups:

- permethrin
- pyrethrins (or bioallethrin) with piperonyl butoxide
- maldison (malathion)
- dimeticone (dimethicone), isopropyl myristate, benzyl alcohol
- herbal products and essential oils (e.g. eucalyptus oil, tea tree oil).

Head lice products can lose their effect because lice become resistant to them. You need to check for live (moving) lice the day after treatment using the wet combing method. If you find live lice after a product has been used correctly, then the head lice may be resistant to the active ingredient in that product. You may need to try a product containing an active ingredient from a different group. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

When using a head lice product to kill head lice:

- Follow product instructions carefully (some need dry hair to work).
- Do not use near heaters or open fires as some products can catch fire.
- Dry hair with a towel, not a hair dryer, as heat can affect the product.
- The product may not kill all head lice eggs. To kill lice that may have hatched since the first treatment,

apply the product a second time (or as many times as the product instructions say). Do this 7–10 days after the first treatment. In between treatments, remove eggs at least twice by wet combing. You can also use a product specially made to help remove eggs.

Note: Itching may continue for a few days after the head lice have been killed.

Contacts

School children often get and spread head lice. To stop spread of head lice, tell your child's school that your child has head lice. Also tell friends and family who have been in close contact with your child. Tell them to check themselves and their families for head lice, and to use a head lice treatment if they find living head lice. People living in the same house who find live lice on their head should be treated at the same time. Children can go back to school after the first treatment.

Self care

- Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a head lice product or head lice comb.
- Check hair for head lice and eggs at least once a week for several weeks after cure.
- Soak combs and brushes in very hot water for at least 5 minutes.
- Wash towels, sheets, pillow cases and headwear in hot water (at least 60°C) or dry in clothes dryer for 15 minutes.

- Put items that can't be washed (e.g. soft toys and helmets) in airtight plastic bags for 3–4 days.

To help avoid getting head lice:

- Do not share hats, hairbrushes, combs or pillows.
- Check hair and scalp every week when lice are present in your community (e.g. at school).
- Keep long hair tied back.

Important

- Head lice products can irritate your scalp, and can make head lice resistant to treatments. Only use a product to kill head lice if you find living (moving) head lice.
- Do not use other insecticides or kerosene to treat head lice.

See a pharmacist or doctor if:

- you want to use a head lice product on children under 2 years, or a pregnant or breast feeding woman
- living lice are still present after using a head lice product
- you are thinking of using a head lice product to prevent head lice
- there are signs of infection (e.g. weepy and crusty skin, swollen glands, fever).

For more information

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

NPS MedicineWise

Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: Gosford Paediatrics
Suite 9, 16-18 Hills Street GOSFORD NSW 2250
<http://www.gosfordpaediatrics.com.au>
02 4322 5437

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