

Thousands of children every year catch head lice, so if someone in your family has them they are not alone and it's certainly nothing to be ashamed about. Here's what to look for and some advice on what to do



PARENT

Some lice advice

In the past, schools were the only place where head lice were checked for. School nurses no longer carry out routine inspections, mainly because this method detected less than half of infestations and did not tackle the source of the problem, which is outside of school. Head lice are much more common in the home and local community than in schools. Prevention and detection at home by everyone in the family is the only way to control head lice.

Anyone can catch head lice – adults as well as children. They are passed on by close head to head contact; clean or short hair is no protection. Head lice may be a nuisance but they do not cause any harm. The best approach is to check your child's hair on a regular basis for any signs of head lice.

Daily brushing and combing of hair, morning and night, helps to prevent head lice infestation and should remove any stray lice picked up during the day. Combing can damage the lice.

Looking for lice

A live louse is the only definite sign of an infestation. Lice eggs are dark and glued to the base of the hair at the scalp. Empty hatched eggshells (nits) are white and grow out with the hair.

If you see either of these, check carefully for lice. The shed skins and droppings of lice may also be seen on collars or pillows as black specks or powder.

If you are worried, then lice are most easily detected by regularly combing really wet hair from the roots, preferably with a fine toothcomb, straight after normal shampooing. Looking for head lice on a regular basis is the best form of prevention.

If you do find live lice, first follow the wet combing method using hair conditioner and a fine toothcomb to get rid of them (see box). Remember to check the whole family. This avoids the unnecessary use of chemicals (lotions).

If you choose to use a head lice lotion, follow the manufacturers' instructions carefully. It is important that the correct treatment is used.

The wet combing method

You will need:

- Ordinary hair shampoo.
- Ordinary hair conditioner.
- A fine metal tooth comb.

Directions:

- Wash the hair in the normal way with an ordinary shampoo.
- Inspect the rinsing water for lice floating to the surface.
- Using lots of hair conditioner, and while the hair is very wet, comb through with a fine tooth comb. Make sure that the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots with every stroke. Do this over a pale surface such as a paper towel.
- Sodden lice will not move and slippery hair is hard for lice to get a grip on so they should be easy to remove with a comb.
- You should repeat this routine every two to three days for at least two weeks until the lice are gone.

You can buy a detection comb from the chemist. If you need help and advice, ask your local chemist, health visitor, school nurse or family doctor.



What are head lice?

Head lice are small wingless insects which grow to about the size of a sesame seed. They live close to the scalp and grip onto the hair shaft by using the claws on their legs. They bite into the scalp and feed off human blood.

The female lice lay eggs in sacks which are attached to the hair shaft. Nits are not the same as lice – they are simply the empty egg cases left behind after the louse has hatched. The eggs take seven to 10 days to hatch and the lice take seven to 14 days to grow.