

## Head lice

As School Nurses/ Nursery Nurses we often get asked about how to get rid of head lice. Head lice have been around for thousands of years; they were found on Egyptian mummies and are a real nuisance at times for children, parents, school staff and school nurses!

The following information can be found on the NHS Choices website – see below.

Head lice are tiny wingless insects that cannot fly, jump or swim. They are the size of a pinhead when they hatch out and grow to the size of a sesame seed when fully grown. They are spread by head-to-head contact and are mostly found behind the ears and the nape of the neck. Head lice are most common in children aged between 4 to 11 years old. A head lice infestation is not the result of dirty hair or poor hygiene.



### Life cycle of head lice

A female head louse lays eggs by cementing them to hairs close to the root, where they will be kept warm by the scalp. They hatch 7 to 10 days later; the empty eggshells (nits) remain glued in place. Nits glisten white and become more noticeable as the growth of the hair carries them away from the scalp (approx. 1.25 cms per month). Head lice feed by biting the scalp and sucking blood through it. They take 6 to 10 days to become fully grown and once mature, a head louse can transfer from head to head.

After mating, a female may start to lay eggs as early as the seventh day after she has hatched. So to break the life cycle and stop head lice spreading, they need to be removed from the head before the sixth day after hatching.

Head lice often cause the scalp to itch, although this is not always the case (53% of people who have them don't itch!). Itching is not caused by the lice biting the scalp but by an allergy to the lice.

Head lice are difficult to detect on the head, even when the head is closely inspected and detection combing is a very effective way of checking for any infestation. Live lice need to be seen to establish an infestation.

### Wet detection combing

For wet detection combing, follow the steps below.

- Wash the hair using ordinary shampoo and apply lots of conditioner, before using a wide-toothed comb to straighten and untangle the hair.
- Once the comb moves freely through the hair without dragging, switch to the louse detection comb. Make sure that the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots with the bevel-edge of the teeth lightly touching the scalp.
- Draw the comb down to the ends of the hair, checking on a white background after each stroke i.e. white paper or towel, helps to detect the lice.
- Remove lice by wiping or rinsing the comb.

- Work methodically through the hair, section by section, so that the whole head of hair is combed through.
- Rinse out the conditioner and repeat the combing procedure in the wet hair.
- Repeat the procedure on day 5, 9 and 13 in order to clear the young lice as they hatch, before they have time to reach maturity.

Sometimes the head lice problem returns 3 to 4 weeks later, this may mean that they may not have been fully cleared the first time they were treated. The lice might have been removed but not all the nits and 3 to 4 weeks later those nits have hatched and matured.

A head lice infestation cannot be easily prevented so regular detection combing – for example, on a weekly basis, is the best way to find new lice quickly. It is also important to check all members of the family.

Head lice lotions are an alternative method for treating head lice. Head lice combs can be purchased at chemists and some supermarkets.

Further information can be sought by speaking to your School Nurses and Nursery Nurses or can be found on the following websites:

**NHS Choices:** [www.nhs.uk/conditions/head-lice/pages/prevention](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/head-lice/pages/prevention)

**Department of health website:** [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)