

HEAD LICE FACT SHEET

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live on the human scalp. These insects lay eggs called nits, which stick to the hair close to the scalp. Head lice are not a health risk, do not spread disease and can affect people from all walks of life. Head lice can be eliminated with persistence and good information (Harvard School of Public Health).

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact with another person who has head lice. They cannot fly, jump or swim. Brushes and combs can transfer mature head lice. Lice are not likely to leave a warm head to lurk in clothing, furniture and bed linen where it is cold and there isn't any food. Therefore these items are less likely to spread head lice.

What are signs of head lice?

- One of the first signs may be itching or scratching
- Crawling head lice are hard to see because they can run quickly. Adult lice are usually dark brown and about 2-3 mm long. Young lice are often a lighter brown and about 1-2 mm long.
- Eggs (nits) are easier to see. Nits are grey-white, oval in shape and are about the size of a grain of salt.
- Nits are firmly attached to the hair close to the scalp...
- Nits may look like dandruff but cannot be flicked off.

Supplies recommended to check effectively for head lice:

- Conditioner (white in colour, not expensive.)
- Wide-tooth comb to untangle the hair.
- A nit comb, a metal fine-tooth comb with smooth round teeth that are about 4-5 cm long and have a separation of 1 mm.

How do I look for head lice?

1. Shampoo the hair.
2. Rinse and towel dry.
3. Put a generous amount of conditioner to cover the whole scalp.
4. Untangle the hair with a wide tooth comb.
5. Section and comb the hair with the fine-tooth nit comb. After each stroke, wipe the comb on a paper towel and look for lice. Pay particular attention to the hair behind the ears and at the nape of the neck.
6. Make sure you comb the whole head.

What do I do if I find head lice?

- Using the conditioner method, check all family members to see if anyone else has head lice. Treatment is necessary for only those who have lice and/or eggs. It is important that these people be treated at the same time.
- Choose one of the treatments on the attached pages and follow the instructions carefully.
- Inform the school or daycare so they can advise other parents to check their child's hair. Also inform other contacts including playgroups, neighbours and relatives.
- When treatment is completed, with all the head lice and eggs removed, check the hair regularly, e.g., weekly, for any further head lice infestation. The earlier the detection, the better.

How do I treat head lice?

There are three methods of treating head lice: Insecticide, Non-insecticidal alternatives and a 10-day conditioner treatment (see attached pages). Choose whichever method best suits you and your family. For successful removal of head lice, be sure to follow the directions for your preferred treatment **exactly**.

Household Cleaning

Head lice do not live long away from the scalp and nits are unlikely to hatch at room temperature. Excessive cleaning of personal, school and household items is therefore not necessary. As a precaution, wash bed linen, hats, in hot water and dry in a hot dryer. Wash combs, brushes or anything put on the head with soap and boil in water for 10 minutes. Storing items in plastic bags for 10-14 days also kills the lice.

'Trouble-shooting' Checklist

If treatment is unsuccessful, check the following:

- Was insecticide applied exactly as recommended by package instructions?
- Was treatment repeated in 7-10 days?
- Was the 10 day conditioning treatment continued for 10 days (hatching cycle of the eggs)?
- Were as many eggs as possible removed **every day**?
- Was a metal fine tooth 'nit' comb used?
- Was plenty of hair conditioner applied to saturate the hair?

Prevention Activities/Ideas to Help Prevent Infestation

- **Check your child's hair every week** for head lice and eggs (nits).
Be particularly watchful after sleepovers, camp, **after school breaks** and at the beginning of the school year.
- **Tie long hair back** – braid and/or put up if possible.
- **Consider applying hair gel or mousse** – these do not prevent or repel lice but help keep stray hair strands from contact with other heads.
- **Avoid sharing combs, brushes, hats, hair bands, scrunchies and head sets.**
- **Remind your child to try to avoid head-to-head contact** with other children, e.g., when working at the computer with others, or when playing, or hugging.
- **Encourage** children to put hats and scarves in the sleeves of their coats.

We all have to work together to help reduce the spread of head lice. Regular inspection of your child's scalp is the best possible preventative measure.