

HEAD LICE ARE TINY INSECTS THAT LIVE IN HAIR NITS ARE THE EMPTY EGG CASES ATTACHED TO HAIR THAT HEAD LICE HATCH FROM

Head lice are a common problem, particularly in school children.

They're largely harmless, but can live in the hair for a long time if not treated and can be irritating and frustrating to deal with.

HOW TO SPOT HEAD LICE

Head lice can be difficult to spot, even when the head is closely inspected.

They're very small whitish or grey-brown insects that range from the size of a pinhead to the size of a sesame seed.

The only way to be sure someone has head lice is to find a live louse by combing their hair with a special fine-toothed comb. This is called detection combing.



Less reliable signs of head lice include:

- small white eggs or nits (egg cases) in the hair behind the ears or at back of the neck – see image above
- an itchy scalp
- a rash on the back of the neck
- feeling as though something is moving in the hair

HOW YOU GET HEAD LICE

Head lice are spread by direct head to head contact. They climb from one person's hair to another's.

Head lice:

- can't fly, jump or swim
- are very unlikely to be spread by objects such as hats, combs and pillows
- don't have a preference for dirty, clean, short or long hair
- only affect people and can't be caught from animals

Once detached from the hair, head lice will usually die within 12-24 hours.

HOW TO GET RID OF HEAD LICE AND NITS

Treatments to get rid of head lice are available to buy from pharmacies, supermarkets and online. You don't usually need to see your GP.

The main treatments are:

- **Lotions or sprays:** there are several different products that can be applied to the scalp and hair to kill head lice– these can be very effective, but some aren't suitable for pregnant or breastfeeding women, or for children under 2. Some treatments need be done twice – seven days apart – to make sure any newly hatched lice are killed.
- **Detection combing:** removing head lice with a specially designed comb – this is suitable for everyone and relatively inexpensive, but needs to be repeated several times and can take a long time to do thoroughly

A pharmacist can advise you about the treatments available if you're not sure which is best for you or your child.

Make sure you carefully follow the instructions that come with the treatment you choose.

PREVENTING HEAD LICE

It's very difficult to prevent head lice.

Lotions and sprays don't prevent head lice and should only be used if a live louse has been found in your or your child's hair.

Detection combing should usually be done two or three days after finishing treatment, and again another seven days after that, to check for any live head lice.

Your pharmacist can recommend a suitable treatment and advise you how to use it correctly if necessary.

You may want to consider regular detection combing for example, on a weekly basis – if you're concerned about your children or yourself.

Wet combing

Wet combing involves removing head lice with a special fine-toothed comb. It's suitable for everyone and is relatively inexpensive.

A number of lice removal combs are available to buy. Combs with flat-faced teeth spaced 0.2-0.3mm apart are best for removing head lice, although combs with smaller gaps can be used to remove eggs and nits (egg cases) after treatment.

The comb may come with instructions outlining how to use it. A commonly used method is described below.

- Wash the hair with ordinary shampoo and apply plenty of conditioner.
- Use an ordinary, 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 the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots, with the edge of the teeth lightly touching the scalp.
- Draw the comb down from the roots to the ends of the hair with every stroke, and check the comb for lice each time – remove lice by wiping the comb with tissue paper or rinsing it.
- Work through the hair, section by section, so that the whole head of hair is combed through.
- Do this at least twice to help ensure you haven't missed any areas, until no more lice are found.

Repeat this procedure on days five, nine and 13. Detection combing should be done on day 17, to check for any live head lice.