

HEAD LICE INFORMATION

We have had a number of reports of head lice across the school, it is really important that you check your child's hair

Parents of young school children will know what a headache head lice can be.

Around three million people in the UK catch head lice every year - and according to independent research, around one in five children are affected.

To help beat the bugs, charity Community Hygiene Concern is today holding its National Bug Busting Day - offering lots of advice to help parents detect and eliminate lice.

The facts

- Head lice are small, six-legged wingless insects, pin-head size when they hatch, less than match-head size when fully grown and grey/brown in colour.
- They are difficult to detect in dry hair even when the head is closely inspected.
- They very often cause itching, but this is not always the case, particularly when recently arrived on the head.
- Head lice cannot fly, jump or swim, but spread by clambering from head to head.
- Anyone with hair can catch them, but children, who have head to head contact, either at school or during play, are most commonly affected.
- Head lice feed by biting and sucking blood through the scalp of their host.
- The female louse lays eggs in sacs (nits) which are very small, dull in colour, and well camouflaged.
- These are securely glued to hairs where the warmth of the scalp will hatch them out in 7-10 days.
- Empty egg sacs are white and shiny and may be found further along the hair shaft as the hair grows out.
- Lice take 6-14 days to become fully grown, after which they are capable of reproduction.
- Head lice are not fussy about hair length or condition. Clean hair is therefore no protection, although regular (e.g. weekly) hair washing and combing sessions offer a good opportunity to detect head lice, and arrange treatment if discovered.

Who catches head lice?

- Children between the ages of 4 and 11 have the highest chance of catching head lice, because of their close contact with other children at school.
- Adults between the ages of 24 and 36 are also very likely to get head lice because they often have close contact with children.
- Girls have a higher chance of getting head lice than boys do - and researchers think this is because girls are more likely to put their heads together when they're playing or working.
- You'll rarely catch head lice from a stranger. It's more likely to be from someone in your family or your regular group of friends.
- If you have long hair, once you have head lice you're likely to have more of them than if you have short hair. This is because the head lice are less likely to find their way down long hair and onto someone else's head, so they stay where they are.

How to look for head lice

- Wash the hair using ordinary shampoo, then use a wide toothed comb to straighten and untangle the hair. It is easier to do this with wet hair, and using hair conditioner.
- Once the comb moves freely through the hair, without dragging, switch to a fine tooth comb.
- Make sure the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots and draw down to the ends of the hair with every stroke.
- The comb must be fine enough to catch the lice.
- Do not confuse lice or their eggs with clumps of dandruff or other debris.
- Check the comb for lice after each stroke as you work through the hair section by section, so that the whole head of hair is combed through, then rinse out the conditioner and repeat the combing procedure in the wet hair.
- *This can be undertaken on a regular basis to detect the presence of lice before they can spread.
- Check all family members at the same time and arrange treatment when lice are found.

What to do if you find head lice

- Head lice are difficult to remove because of their size, re-infestation rate, life cycle and their ability to develop immunity to insecticides.
- Lice can be a persistent and recurring nuisance, so it is important to treat them quickly and thoroughly.
- Once infestation is confirmed it can be treated at home by either using a wet comb with conditioner, or medicated lotions, combined with a special nit comb available from pharmacies.

Wet combing method to get rid of head lice

Wet combing, or 'bug-busting' is used to remove lice without using chemical treatments. This method can be helpful because head lice are growing increasingly resistant to the insecticides used to remove them.

The best procedure is as follows:

- Wash the hair as normal using an ordinary shampoo
- Apply conditioner liberally to wet hair (this causes the lice to lose their grip on the hair)
- Comb the hair through with a normal comb first
- With a fine tooth nit comb, comb from the roots along the complete length of the hair and after each stroke check the comb for lice and wipe it clean. Work methodically over the whole head for at least 30 minutes
- Rinse the hair as normal
- Repeat every three days for at least two weeks

Medicated lotion or rinse

- Ask your pharmacist for an over-the-counter (OTC) insecticide lotion or crème rinse.
- Only use a lotion if you find a living (moving) head louse.
- Apply the preparation according to the instructions, and remove the lice and eggs with a fine-toothed nit comb.
- You should take care when applying treatment because the preparations are usually toxic.
- The normal advice is to treat once, and repeat seven days later.
- Always ask for advice before using medicated lotions on young babies (under six months), pregnant women or people with asthma, or allergies, and always read the instructions carefully.
- Sometimes complementary therapy treatments such as tea tree oil are recommended for treating head lice, but their effectiveness has not yet been proven.
- There is no need to wash clothing, or bedding, if they have come into contact with head lice. This is because head lice quickly die without a host to provide warmth and food.