

Parents' Guide to Headlice

Headlice are highly contagious, and can spread rapidly in settings where children are in close contact (such as schools, nurseries and sports clubs), as well as within families. They can also be hard to get rid of, and are prone to returning just when we thought we had got rid of them.

What are headlice?

Headlice are tiny insects that live in the hair and feed on tiny amounts of blood taken from the scalp. They are greyish-white or tan in colour and about the size of a sesame seed. They lay eggs called 'nits' which they attach to the hair shaft with a strong glue. The eggs are laid close to the scalp where it is warmest and look like tiny dots. They are yellow, tan or brown in colour before they hatch, and clear or white after hatching. Young lice, or 'nymphs', hatch from the eggs and take around 1-2 weeks to mature into egg-laying adult lice.

How do you catch headlice?

Headlice cannot jump, but they do have specially adapted claws which enable them to cling to the hair shaft. The most common way of catching headlice is head-to-head contact, as they crawl from one head to the other, and this is why they are so common in places where children work and play together, and more common in primary-age children who tend to be in closer contact. Less commonly, lice can also be spread through sharing hats, bed linen, brushes, combs and hair bands or clips.

Are headlice dangerous?

Headlice are unpleasant, but not dangerous at all. The main risk is if scratching breaks the skin, and a bacterial infection could occur. If this happens, you should seek advice from your GP.

How can I tell if my child has lice?

It is more common to see nits in your child's hair than adult lice, unless the infestation is very heavy. Often you will spot the empty egg cases as the hair grows away from the scalp. Contrary to popular belief, having headlice does not always cause itching (especially not at first). The itching is actually a reaction to the saliva of the louse, and many people do not react at first, so by the time your child starts scratching or complaining of an itchy head, they could have had lice for quite some time. The best way to stay on top of headlice is to check your child's hair for nits regularly (at least weekly).

My child has headlice, what should I do?

If you discover your child has headlice, you should treat them as quickly as possible. All family members will need to be treated too, and ideally on the same day. There are two options for treatment - lotions or sprays which kill the lice, or wet combing.

What lotions and sprays are available?

You can buy headlice treatments over the counter at your local pharmacy, so there is no need to see the doctor. In the past, headlice were treated with insecticide-based lotions, but these are uncommon now, as there were concerns about their risk to health. In addition, headlice were developing resistance to the chemicals being used. Nowadays, headlice treatments tend to contain either dimeticone or cyclomethicone, both of which act by coating the lice and preventing them from breathing.

How do I use a lotion to treat headlice?

Different lotions require different methods of application, so it is important that you read the instructions carefully and follow them to the letter. Most lotions and sprays have to be applied and left on the hair for a period of time before the hair is washed and combed through to remove the lice.

What is wet combing?

Wet combing is becoming increasingly popular as a way of treating headlice, as it doesn't require the use of chemical sprays or lotions. To treat lice by wet combing, you need to wet the hair and apply plenty of conditioner (any variety will do). Then comb through the hair methodically, from root to tip, using a fine-toothed comb (special 'nit combs' are available from pharmacies). Wipe the comb on some tissue paper after each section has been combed, and make sure you have combed every strand of hair. Wet combing works by removing adult lice and immature lice before they are able to lay eggs, thus eventually ensuring no more eggs will be laid. To ensure this works, you need to wet comb every 3-4 days for 3 weeks.

How can I stop the lice from returning?

Many parents find that they treat a case of lice, only to find it returns within a matter of weeks. It could be that your child is catching them again from someone at school or within the family. The best way to prevent reinfestation is to check your child's hair regularly and treat them as soon as you notice any new signs of lice. Alternatively, you could build wet-combing into your weekly routine, as this will remove lice before they have chance to lay eggs. Talk to your child about trying not to touch heads with other children and avoiding sharing hats, brushes and hair clips. You could also make sure long hair is tied back at school.

What do I do if the lice won't go?

If you have followed all the steps above (treating all family members, checking regularly, wet-combing regularly) and your child is still showing signs of lice, you should consult your GP who may be able to suggest alternative treatments. You may also wish to wash your towels and bedlinen on a hot wash (60°) together with any headgear, clean brushes, combs and hair clips by soaking them in surgical spirit (or throw them away and get new ones). Headlice cannot survive for long off the human head, but you might want to thoroughly vacuum your carpets and soft furnishings as well.

Do I need to keep my child off school if they have headlice?

There is no need for children to miss school with lice. Most treatments can be done overnight. You should, however, inform your child's school, as well as other caregivers such as childminders or after-school clubs, if your child has developed headlice. Schools often like to let parents know there is a case of headlice so that they can check their children's hair and prevent the lice from spreading. Rest assured that your child will not be identified or singled out - schools tend to just send a general message to parents asking them to check their children's hair.

Can my pets spread lice?

No, not at all. Human lice cannot survive on other animals, so your dog or cat will not be re-infesting you! Unfortunately, headlice are a fact of life, especially for primary-aged children. And it seems that some children are particularly susceptible, whereas others never catch them at all. The best way to treat these pesky creatures is to be vigilant - check hair as regularly as you can and treat quickly, making sure all family members are treated, whether they are showing signs or not. And don't forget that although they are unpleasant, headlice are not a sign of dirty hair or poor hygiene.