



Health Fact Sheet:

The management of Head Lice (*Pediculus Humanus Capitis*)

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insects that live in human hair. They're particularly common in children. Head lice are whitish to grey-brown in color, and smaller than the size of a pinhead when first hatched. When fully grown they're about the size of a sesame seed. They can't fly, jump or swim and are spread by head-to-head contact, climbing from the hair of an infected person to the hair of someone else. A head lice infestation isn't the result of dirty hair or poor hygiene. All types of hair can be affected, regardless of its length and condition. Anyone can catch head lice, school children and their families are most at risk.

What are the signs of head lice?

- **Itching.** Itching on the scalp, neck and ears is the most common symptom. This is an allergic reaction to louse saliva. When a person has an infestation for the first time, itching may not occur for two to six weeks after infestation.
- **Lice on scalp.** Lice may be visible but are difficult to spot because they're small, avoid light and move quickly.
- **Lice eggs (nits) on hair shafts.** Nits stick to hair shafts. Incubating nits may be difficult to see because they're very tiny and camouflaged to match hair color. They're easiest to spot around the ears and the hairline of the neck. Empty nits may be easier to spot because they're lighter in color and further from the scalp. However, the presence of nits doesn't necessarily indicate an active infestation.

How do you catch head lice?

Head-to-head contact is the most common way to get head lice. The lice move from one person to the next by crawling. They cannot fly or jump. It may seem like lice can jump because they are tiny and move quickly. Head lice actually crawl everywhere. They crawl from person to person and on to objects that come into contact with human hair such as hats and towels.



What should I do if I find head lice?

A diagnosis of head lice can only be made if a living, moving louse is found.

Check all household members for head lice. Inform the school and any other contacts so that they can be checked.

How do I detect/prevent head lice?

Good hair care will not prevent head lice infection but may help to identify head lice at an early stage.

Weekly detection combing of children is recommended. A detection comb can be purchased from pharmacies. Detection combing is particularly important when you know that head to head contact with an infected person has occurred or when members of the household have been named as contacts.

The use of repellents is discouraged as there is little or no scientific evidence to support their effectiveness.

Insecticides will not prevent head lice infection and may encourage resistance.

How do I treat head lice?

Detection/wet combing is the best method to detect and clear head lice.

Use your normal shampoo and apply plenty of conditioner. The conditioner works by immobilising the lice so that it is easier to trap them in the teeth of the comb. Suitable combs can be purchased from most pharmacies.

While the hair is still dripping slot a fine tooth comb into the hair at the roots. Hold the comb tight to the scalp and then run down the full length of the hair. Clear the comb with a tissue between each stroke to avoid combing them back into the hair.

Section and comb the hair thoroughly with the nit comb until the whole head has been screened. It takes approximately 10-20 minutes to do it properly for each head.

Repeat this process every one to two days over a two week period to cover the hatching cycle of the eggs.

Insecticide lotion or liquid formulations are recommended for the treatment of head lice infection. A reputable pharmacy will assist you with your product selection as products are rotated to prevent lice from becoming immune.

Always follow the instructions included, one treatment is considered as two applications one week apart.

Insecticide shampoos are considered to be less effective than lotions as they have low efficacy in killing the eggs.

Insecticides used for the treatment of head lice infection have a good track record for safety but should not be used more than once in a week.



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Contact tracing is an essential element of control and management and involves telling anyone who has had head to head contact with the case for more than one minute (e.g. parents, siblings' friends) so they can perform detection combing and treat as necessary.

Note: According to DHA

Head lice case exclusion from school until appropriate treatment has commenced.