

Head Lice and Nits

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny wingless insects (2-3mm long) that live in the hair feeding on human blood and vary in colour from cream to brown/black. They crawl quickly on the scalp and are difficult to see. They do not jump, hop or swim and cannot be caught from animals.

What are nits?

'Nits' is the common name for the small eggs that are laid by head lice. They are the size of a grain of salt, yellow-white in colour, and are found glued to the hair near the scalp. Common places for nits to be found are behind the ears, the back of neck and the fringe. Dead nits are often black in colour and are found well away from the scalp.

Life cycle of head lice

Nits are laid within 1 cm of the scalp and take about 7-10 days to hatch into head lice. They will only hatch if kept at a high temperature in a moist environment such as the scalp. They die within a few days away from the scalp.

How are head lice spread?

Head lice are highly contagious. They are usually spread by direct hair to hair contact with an infected person. Head lice cannot jump or fly from head to head but may be passed on by sharing hats and brushes. They are unlikely to be spread through bedding, furniture or carpets. Cleanliness does not prevent head lice; anyone can catch them.



Head lice are commonly found in primary school children because of their often close personal contact with each other.



What are the symptoms?

Head lice may cause itch and irritation, leading to sleep disturbance and behaviour problems. They do not transmit any infectious diseases. Scratching resulting in breaks in the skin may lead to skin and lymph gland infection.



Chemical treatments

Head lice treatments belong in one of the following categories depending on the active compound they contain:

- Permethrin (eg Pyrifoam, Quellada, Lyclclear)
- Pyrethrins (eg Banlice, Meditox, Paralice)
- Malathion (eg Lice Rid, KP 24)



No treatment kills all of the eggs so treatment must involve 2 applications 7 days apart. The aim of the first treatment is to kill all lice, the second treatment is to kill all young lice hatched during the 6 day period between treatments.



Treatments should be used according to the instructions on the packet. Overuse does not assist in getting rid of head lice and increases the risks of toxic effects. Toxic effects may include mild irritation of the eyes, skin, nose and throat or if alcohol based products are used, pain or irritation of open sores and cuts.

All household members should be checked for head lice and everyone with head lice should be treated at the same time.

If a child is found to have head lice their school, playgroup, childcare centre etc should be notified so other children can be checked and treated if necessary.

Treatment precautions

- Pregnant women, people with sensitive skin and parents of young babies should consult with a doctor before applying head lice treatments.
- Avoid the product coming into contact with eyes, nose or throat.
- The person applying the treatment should wear protective gloves (to avoid unnecessary exposure to the treatment).

Other treatment options

Hair conditioner or olive oil or petroleum jelly and wet combing

This method is more time consuming and will not kill eggs. The product applied immobilises the lice so that they can be combed out before they lay eggs. Eggs may be removed by the combing process or can be picked off by hand. This treatment should be carried out every second day until no live head lice have been found for 10 consecutive days.

- apply product to dry hair – use enough to cover the whole scalp and all hair from roots to tips
- use a normal comb to remove tangles and evenly distribute the product throughout the hair
- divide hair into 4 or more sections using hair clips
- use a fine tooth/head lice comb to systematically comb each section of hair from scalp to tips
- wipe the comb after each stroke to remove immobilised lice
- comb each section of hair at least twice
- wash remaining product from hair

“Natural” and other products

Treatments involving ti-tree oil, eucalyptus oil or kerosene are not recommended. These products have not been proven to be as safe or effective as standard treatments, are more toxic and are likely to burn the skin.

If treatment doesn't work

True treatment failure has occurred when live lice are found immediately after treatment.

Treatment failures may result from inappropriate treatment, hatching of lice from eggs since the last treatment, resistance of head lice to a particular treatment product or re-infestation from others who have been inadequately or not treated.

Eggs found more than 1 cm from the scalp do not represent treatment failure, they are usually dead or hatched eggs.

Suggested management:

- increase fine combing (eg twice daily)
- change to a different category of treatment product
- seek advice from a doctor or pharmacist

Prevention of head lice

Head lice treatments should not be used for prevention, and do not stop you from catching head lice.

When lice are present in the community, simple measures for prevention include:

- weekly hair and scalp checks
- combing frequently with nit combs
- avoid sharing brushes, combs, hats, pillows
- washing brushes and combs once a week in hot soapy water
- keeping long hair tied back

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control

Darwin	8922 8044
Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0359
Tennant Creek	8962 4259
Alice Springs	8951 7549