

Head Lice - who gets them?

Anyone can pick up head lice, however infestation is most common among children as the head-to-head activities of children at play facilitate transmission. Head lice do not reflect standards of hygiene in the home or in the school. Head lice are just as willing to live in clean hair as in an unclean head.

Head Lice - how are they passed?

Head lice are passed by direct head contact with lice simply walking from one head to the next. Lice may also be passed indirectly through the common use of brushes, combs, and hats.

Head Lice - how are they diagnosed?

Head scratching is usually the first sign that a child has head lice. By the time a child is consciously irritated by their presence, the lice will have been there for quite a while. It is better to check children's hair on a regular basis. This should be done, using a special fine-toothed comb (available from any chemist) and combing the hair carefully down onto a white towel or cloth. Adult lice can be removed in this way and will be seen as dark oval specks as they fall onto the towel. The hair should also be checked for the presence of nits, pearly grey specks smaller than a grain of caster sugar. These are most commonly found around the nape of the neck and behind the ears. They stick firmly to the hair. If you see a white speck on the hair shaft, gently place the hair between two fingers and slide the fingers down along it. Dandruff or dust will readily come away. Nits stick and can be felt as the fingers pass over them. If lice are found in one member of the family, quite likely all members are infected.

Head Lice - how are they treated?

A variety of effective preparations, shampoos and lotions, are available at the chemist. It is important that the instructions are accurately followed. **Shampoos kill the head lice but do not kill the eggs** and thus must be used repeatedly until all hatched nits are killed. The lotions, while messier to apply, have the benefit of killing the nits as well as the hatched lice. Massage the lotion into the hair, saturate

well, and allow the hair dry naturally. Heat should not be applied as it can inactivate the lotions. The hair may be washed in the normal way after a specified time. Getting rid of the nits is difficult. A solution of vinegar and water applied to the hair helps loosen the nits which can then be removed using a fine-toothed nit removal comb. Nits remaining in the hair after a treatment programme such as this should be dead. However to ensure that none have escaped, it is a good idea to wash the hair with one of the anti-head lice shampoos 7 to 10 days after the initial treatment.

Personal clothing, bed linens, and anything that might have become infested, should be washed in HOT water where possible. (The hot cycle of most washing machines is adequate). Brushes and combs should either be boiled for 10 minutes or soaked in a dilute bleach solution for 1 hour.

Problems can arise in eradicating head lice in a school, not because the preparations are ineffective but because infection passes, forward and back, between the children. Some preparations offer extended protection for a time after use, nonetheless it may still be necessary to designate a special head-treatment week-end within a school and co-ordinate treatment of all children to bring an outbreak to an end. A spray is also available from chemists which sprayed on lice free hair repels infestation and may help keep heads lice free.

Head Lice - should children be excluded?

If active head lice infestation is noted during school all possible head (and hair) contact between the affected child and other children should be avoided. At the end of the school day the parents should be notified and advised to treat the child before returning him/her to school.

Head Lice - when can children return?

As soon as they have been treated. It is impractical to require removal of all nits before return to school. If the lotions have been properly used the nits will be dead and should not pose a risk to others.

Head Lice - how to stop spread

- Notify any parents if nits are seen in the child's hair and advise them to treat the child before he/she returns to school. A sample letter of notification to parents is given in the Appendix.
- Notify parents of all children if there has been a case in the school so that they might be vigilant in checking their own children.
- Discourage sharing of hats, brushes and combs.
- **If there is a persistent problem within a classroom/school, designate a special head treatment week-end and request that all parents treat their children that week-end.**