



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



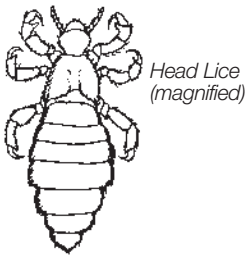
Head Lice

Head lice are mostly spread by head-to-head contact with someone who already has head lice. Having head lice is not a sign of poor hygiene and head lice do not carry or spread other diseases. Anyone can catch head lice at any age. Ask a pharmacist how to find and treat head lice.

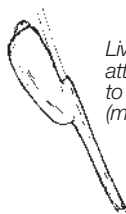
Head lice are wingless insects that make their home on people's scalps. They are often difficult to see. Their favourite hiding places are behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Head lice feed on human blood and their bite can be itchy.

Female lice lay their eggs close to the scalp. The eggs are glued to the hair strands and hatch in about seven days. The eggs are also called nits.

Individual lice cannot live for more than a few days off the head.



Head Lice
(magnified)



Live egg (nit)
attached
to hair
(magnified)

Important

- Only use a head lice product if you find living lice – head lice products do not prevent head lice. Overuse of head lice products can cause scalp irritation and may lead to lice that are resistant to treatment.
- Do not use other insecticides or kerosene to treat head lice.
- Consult a doctor or pharmacist if:
 - Lice are still present after treatment with a head lice product
 - There are signs of infection (e.g., weeping and crusting on the skin, swollen glands, fever).

Signs and symptoms

- Itching scalp.
- Live lice on the scalp or hair. They range from 1-4mm long and from colourless to reddish brown.
- Pale, white specks (eggs) stuck to bases of hair strands that do not fall out when the hair is shaken.
- Skin sores caused by scratching – which can become infected.

Finding head lice (detection combing)

An easy way to find lice and eggs is by wet combing (also called 'conditioner and comb' method):

- Apply to DRY hair, enough hair conditioner to cover each hair strand from root to tip. Apply the conditioner evenly and detangle hair using an ordinary comb
- Divide the hair into 3-4cm sections and starting at the scalp, comb each section using a fine toothed lice comb. Lice combs are available from pharmacies
- After each stroke, wipe the conditioner off the comb onto a paper towel and look for lice and eggs. Remove all eggs and lice from the comb after each stroke
- Repeat the combing at least twice for every part of the head and then thoroughly rinse the hair.

Hair conditioner makes it hard for lice to crawl or cling to hair. Any type of hair conditioner may be used.

Removing head lice

Head lice can sometimes be removed by wet combing, done every day for 10-14 days until no lice or eggs are found. Electrified lice combs are also available, which kill lice by electrocution.

A more reliable way of removing head lice is to kill them using a head lice product. Head lice products are available as shampoos, mousses, conditioners, lotions and sprays and fall into one of four groups according to the active ingredient:

1. Pyrethrins
2. Synthetic pyrethroids (e.g., permethrin, bioallethrin)
3. Organophosphates (e.g., malathion/maldison)
4. Herbal and essential oils (e.g., eucalyptus oil).

Lice can become resistant to some active ingredients. Check for live lice 24-48 hours after treatment, using wet combing. If live lice are present after a treatment, then a different product, containing a different active ingredient, may be needed. Ask a pharmacist.

When using head lice products:

- Read and follow product instructions carefully
- Some products should not be used on children under two years of age without a doctor's advice
- Do not use near heaters or open fires as some are highly flammable – check the label
- Dry hair with a towel, not a hair dryer, as heat can inactivate the treatment
- Itching may continue for one week after the head lice have been killed
- No single treatment kills 100% of eggs. Apply the product a second time (and third time if recommended), 7-10 days after the first treatment, to kill lice that may have hatched since the first treatment. In between treatments, remove eggs at least twice by wet combing, or use a product specially designed to help remove eggs.

Contacts

School children often get and spread head lice. If your child has head lice you are advised to inform their school and everyone your child has been in close contact with over the past few weeks. This

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

includes family and friends, young and old. Tell them to check themselves and their families for head lice. Only those who have head lice need to be treated and members of the same household who have lice should be treated at the same time. Children can be sent back to school after the first treatment.

Self care

- Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a head lice product.
- Check hair for head lice or eggs at least once a week (wet combing) for several weeks after cure.
- After use, soak combs and brushes in a container of near boiling water for at least 30 seconds.
- Wash towels, sheets, pillow cases and headwear in hot water.
- Place items that can't be washed (e.g., soft toys and helmets) in airtight plastic bags for two weeks.

To help protect against head lice:

- Do not share hats, hairbrushes, combs and pillows
- Carry out weekly hair and scalp checks when lice are present in your community (e.g., at school)
- Keep long hair tied back.

For more information

HEALTHInsite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.