

Head lice Prevention and treatment

What are head lice?

Head lice are small parasitic insects that live close to the human scalp. Head lice are pests but rarely pose a threat to health.

Outbreaks can be minimised if parents and guardians regularly check children for head lice and follow the recommended treatment methods if active lice are found.

- > Adults are called lice and their eggs are called nits.
- > Head lice do not fly, jump, hop or swim – they spread by head-to-head contact by crawling.
- > Lice don't care about hair colour or hair type, and they love both clean and dirty hair.
- > Head lice do not prefer a particular blood group.

Responsibility

Parents and guardians are responsible for checking and treating children for head lice. Pre-schools, schools and child care centres are not.

School and child care centre staff are responsible for informing parents and guardians of cases or suspected cases of head lice.

Checking for head lice and nits

Check everyone in the household for head lice weekly, or daily during an outbreak.

The wet combing technique is a reliable method of checking for head lice, as the conditioner makes lice easier to detect.

If head lice are detected, start treatment using the preferred method. If only nits are found, chemical treatment is not required but wet combing may be done.

Treatment

The two most common methods used for the treatment of head lice are chemical treatment and wet combing method:

- > Chemical treatments use pediculicides, which kill head lice and some nits.
- > Wet combing involves saturating the hair and scalp with a conditioner to stun the lice, making it easier to comb the lice and nits out of the hair.

Chemical treatment

There are four main categories of head lice products currently available in Australia: pyrethrins, synthetic pyrethroids (permethrin, bioallethrin), organophosphates (maldison or malathion), and herbal products with or without pyrethrins.

No treatment kills all nits, so the hair must be re-treated after 7 to 10 days to kill any head lice that may have hatched from nits that survived the first treatment.

Only use treatments made specifically for removing head lice.

Do not use a hair dryer after applying a treatment, as the heat can destroy the active ingredient.

Wet combing treatment

Wet combing can be used to check for and treat head lice. Conditioner stuns head lice for around 20 minutes and also makes hair slippery, making them easier to remove. You will need hair conditioner, a head lice comb and paper towel.

Wet combing using conditioner should be avoided for at least one day before and after chemical treatment, or as per the manufacturer's directions.

Wet combing instructions are available at www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/headlice

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Removing nits

Many people interpret the presence of nits as an indication of an active head lice infestation. However, if the nits are more than 1 to 2 cm from the scalp they may be already hatched or dead. It is not necessary to remove all nits if they are dead, although some people may prefer that the nits are removed.

Treatment failure

Reports of failed head lice treatment are not uncommon. Failure can be due to:

- > inadequate application of product
- > lice being resistant to the treatment used
- > failure to re-treat to kill nymphs newly hatched from nits
- > re-infestation

Re-infestation should not be suspected until all the other potential causes have been ruled out.

If the treatment appears to have failed

If a chemical treatment was used, check the instructions and, if they have not been correctly followed (especially the need to repeat in 7 to 10 days), repeat the treatment.

Try an alternative treatment. Check with your chemist to make sure you are choosing a preparation with a different active ingredient.

Try the wet combing method instead of, or as well as, a chemical treatment. Do not use the wet combing method for at least one day before and after chemical treatment or as per the manufacturer's directions.

Using the wet combing method check the heads of all household members and treat all who have head lice.

Preventing the spread

- > check for head lice weekly – daily during head lice outbreaks
- > treat head lice as soon as they are detected
- > avoid direct head-to-head contact
- > keep long hair firmly plaited or braided and slick down stray hairs with hairspray or gel
- > avoid sharing brushes, combs, hats and helmets

Further information

If you are concerned about head lice or want more information contact:

- > your local pharmacist or GP
- > the Child and Youth Health Parent Helpline: 1300 364 100 or online at www.cyh.com
- > your local council Environmental Health Officer

Look for other SA Health resources about head lice at www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/headlice



For more information

Health Protection Programs - SA Health

Telephone: 08 8226 7100

Facsimile: 08 8226 7102

Email: HealthProtectionPrograms@health.sa.gov.au

Website: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/headlice



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