

# **HEAD LICE**

## **Your Questions Answered**

### **WHAT ARE HEAD LICE?**

They are grey/brown insects, from pin-head to match-head in size (1 to 3mm long) that live close to the scalp on humans. Each egg is glued to a hair, often near the root. Lice and unhatched eggs are hard to spot.

### **WHAT ARE NITS**

Nits are the egg cases left behind when the lice hatch out. They are usually pearly white. Both eggs and nits are very difficult to remove from the hair.

### **HOW DO LICE SPREAD?**

When two heads are touching they climb rapidly through the hair from one head to another. They don't jump. Fly or swim. Lice that fall from the head or amble onto bedding or hats are dying and harmless. Lice caught on combs can re-establish if they are combed back on again within 48 hours.

### **BUT I'VE SEEN THEM JUMP ON THE COMB**

This is due to static electricity making them 'fly' off the comb.

### **WHO CAN GET THEM?**

Anyone with hair. They aren't fussy about clean or dirty hair. Children tend to get them more than adults probably because they put their heads together more than adults do.

### **WHERE DO YOU GET THEM?**

Anywhere. Children get them wherever they mix with other children, this can be both in and out of school.

### **HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD HAS HEAD LICE?**

The main symptom is itching but you can have head lice for up to six weeks before you notice any itching. The best way to find them easily is to check your child's hair regularly by wet combing.

Wash the hair with your ordinary shampoo. Put on lots of any conditioner and comb it through with an ordinary comb. This makes any lice really wet, which keeps them still. Then, using a detection comb (a plastic fine tooth comb) slot the teeth into the hair at the roots and draw the comb down to the tips. Check the comb for lice every time you do this. Continue until you have checked the whole head. Rinse off the conditioner and repeat the combing while the hair is still wet.

### **HOW OFTEN SHOULD I DO THIS?**

It is a good idea to get into a routine and do it about once a week. This means you will be able to treat early if you find them which helps cut down on the number of people who will get head lice.

### **WHAT DO I DO IF I FIND LICE?**

If you find lice, you should check everyone else in the family and treat only those who have them. Also let people who have been in close

contact with anyone with lice know, so they can check as well.

### **WHAT IF I FIND NITS AFTER TREATMENT?**

If you find nits but don't find lice, don't treat. Nits will be left behind on the hairs after you have treated but this doesn't mean the treatment has failed.

### **WHAT DO I USE TO TREAT THE LICE?**

The best way to treat is with a lotion. Your GP, some community nurses and some pharmacists can prescribe these free for children. They can also be purchased over the counter in a pharmacy. Treat everyone with lice at the same time so that untreated people don't re-infect the treated ones. A Bug Buster Kit is another way of treating lice (see later).

### **HOW DO I USE THE LOTION?**

There will be instructions on how to apply the preparation, and how long to leave it on for, in the box – each of the preparations is slightly different. Some stipulate two applications a week apart, and a doctor, nurse or pharmacist may advise this for those that do not. The reason for this is that no treatment is guaranteed to kill unhatched eggs. The eggs that aren't killed will hatch over about 10 days. So it is necessary to check for lice 5 and 12 days after starting treatment. Once treatment is complete, resume your weekly checking routine.

### **WHAT IF I KEEP FINDING LICE?**

There could be 2 reasons for this. It could be because your child has been re-infected with lice. Check the whole family again and treat all those with lice again. Remember to spread the word to family and friends. Don't use more than three treatments with the same product in three weeks. If you still find lice after that ask your GP or pharmacist for advice. The other reason is that the lice were not killed. If you followed the instructions correctly then this might be because the lice are resistant to the particular treatment you used. Ask your GP, healthy visitor, school nurse or pharmacist what you should use for the next treatment.

### **WHAT IF I STILL HAVE NITS?**

Nits (empty egg cases) on their own do not need to be treated. You can remove them by hand or fine tooth combing if you don't like the look of them.

### **BUT MY CHILD IS STILL SCRATCHING**

People can scratch after treatment but it doesn't mean they still have lice. Check your child's head to be sure but only treat if you find live lice. The treatments can make the scalp flaky and itchy. Also some people scratch just thinking or talking about lice.

### **SHOULD I USE A LOTION 'JUST IN CASE' ?**

No. Treatments are safe but they shouldn't be over used. They can also make the itching worse.

### **WHAT IS BUG BUSTING?**

Bug Busting is a clinically proven wet combing method of detecting and treating lice. No lotion is required. To treat, a Bug Buster Kit must be used four times spaced over two weeks. Repeated use is risk free, and the Kit is especially helpful in families where children continually catch lice.

### **I'VE HEARD TEA TREE OIL IS GOOD FOR KILLING AND PREVENTING LICE**

There is no evidence that it works and it can irritate your scalp. Nor is there evidence for vodka, electric combs, products sold to prevent, reinfection or any other folk remedy.

### **SHOULDN'T SCHOOL NURSES CHECK CHILDREN'S HEADS?**

No. Inspections made by school nurses do not stop head lice spreading. They cannot identify all children with head lice. It is much better for parents to check their children's heads regularly (about once a week) as described in this leaflet. However, school nurses are available to give help and advice about head lice to parents.

### **WHAT ABOUT THE SCHOOL - CAN THEY DO ANYTHING?**

In the past, schools have sent out 'alert' letters but these tend to cause stress to children and parents and sometimes outbreaks of imaginary lice. It is much better for all parents to check their children's heads regularly.

### **SHOULD I KEEP MY CHILD OFF SCHOOL?**

NO! Lice are unpleasant and some people sometimes feel embarrassed if they get them but they are not a health hazard. There is no reason for your child to miss out on their education just because of head lice. Keep alert and spread the word to stop the spread of lice.

### **BUG BUSTER KITS**

More information and Bug Buster Kits are obtainable from:

[www.chc.org/bubbusting](http://www.chc.org/bubbusting)

email: [bugbusters2k@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bugbusters2k@yahoo.co.uk)

GP's, nurses and pharmacists may supply a NHS prescription for a Bug Buster Kit, free for children.

All information was taken from the leaflet produced by; Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast. BT4 3SQ

(Copies of this leaflet are available from the school office.)

