

Head lice

Head lice are tiny insect parasites that live on your head and feed on your scalp (the skin covering your head).

They reproduce by laying their eggs (nits) on your hair shaft (the part of your hair closest to the scalp).

Head lice are not dangerous, do not carry diseases, and are not a sign of poor hygiene (cleanliness).

How do you get head lice?

Head lice are spread by head-to-head contact with another person who has head lice. This kind of contact includes doing group work at school, playing, or hugging.

Head lice can run from one head to another in seconds. Head lice cannot fly, jump or swim, but they can sometimes swing from one hair to another.

Brushes and combs are unlikely to transfer head lice or their eggs, as these are very hard to detach from the hair shaft.

Head lice are not spread through bed linen, clothing or head gear (hats and helmets) as they do not leave the scalp unless they are moving to another scalp, or unless they are dead or dying.

What are the signs and symptoms of head lice?

Your scalp may itch as your skin reacts to the saliva of the head lice. This itchiness can take weeks to develop. If you have had head lice before, your skin may become less sensitive and there may be little or no itch.

You may also be able to see head lice crawling in your hair, although they can be difficult to spot as they move quickly.

What do they look like?

- > Adult lice are usually dark brown and about 2 to 3 mm long.
- > Hatchlings (young lice) are often a lighter brown colour and about 1 to 2 mm long.
- > Eggs will be attached to the hair shaft. They can be very tiny and hard to see, especially newly-laid eggs close to the scalp. They are grey-white and about the size of a grain of salt.

How can I check for head lice?

Unless you can easily see the head lice, the speed at which they can move makes checking dry hair unreliable.

To check hair for head lice:

- > Carefully comb plenty of hair conditioner through dry hair. The conditioner slows the head lice down so they can be trapped in the comb.
- > Comb hair again in sections using a metal fine-tooth 'nit comb' (available from most pharmacies).
- > Wipe the waste from the comb on a white paper towel. Look for head lice and eggs using a magnifying glass in strong light, such as sunlight.
- > Use a magnifying glass in strong light to examine hair close to the scalp, especially behind the ears and at the back of the neck.

Distract children while you check for head lice by offering them a favourite video or game, a book, or a head massage.

What can be mistaken for head lice?

Other objects in the hair can be mistaken for head lice or eggs. These include sand, dandruff, flakes of hair spray, ants, aphids, or other small insects.

What if I find head lice?

- > Check to see if anyone else living in your house has head lice – use the hair conditioner method described above.
- > Choose the [treatment method](#) that best suits you and your family and follow the instructions carefully.
- > Inform your school, child care centre, playgroup, neighbours and relatives so that other children and adults who have been in close contact can be checked.
- > When the treatment is completed and all head lice and eggs have been removed, continue to check hair weekly for further outbreaks.

Stay home from school

Under the *School Education Act 1999*, if your child has head lice, the principal may keep him or her away from school until treatment has started.

Your child may return to school when all live head lice have been removed. There is no need to stay away from school if there are only a few remaining eggs, but you must continue treatment over the following 10 days to ensure that all eggs and hatchlings have been removed.

How can I prevent further outbreaks?

- > Check hair regularly for head lice and eggs. Early treatment of head lice can prevent it spreading further to close contacts.
- > Tie long hair back.
- > Hair gel or mousse may help keep stray hair strands from coming in contact with other heads.
- > Avoid sharing combs or brushes.
- > If you have recently had head lice, leave brushes and combs in hot water for 10 minutes after use to kill any trapped head lice or eggs. Clean them with an old toothbrush to help remove any waste.
- > Remind your child to avoid head-to-head contact with other children, for example when working at the computer with others, playing or hugging.

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See also

- > [Treating head lice](#)

Related sites

- > [healthdirect \(external site\)](#)