

Head Lice

Head lice are small wingless biting insects which live and breed in human hair and feed by sucking blood from the scalp (colour plate no. 8). Many lice infestations cause no symptoms and probably less than half cause itching, so you have to look at the hair to see if lice are present (colour plate no. 7).

Use a bright light or sunlight to inspect the hair. You may see small white or brown oblong eggs ('nits') attached to the shafts, and they are difficult to move. The live lice are more difficult to find as they move rapidly away from disturbances in the hair. Adult lice are 2-4mm long and whitish brown in colour.

The best way to check for head lice is to apply a generous amount of hair conditioner (any brand will do), then dry the hair and comb through with a coarse comb to detangle the hair. The conditioner stuns head lice for about 20 minutes. Then use a very fine toothed comb and comb the hair through, wiping it on a tissue regularly so you can check for lice and their eggs

Spread is by direct head-to-head contact with a person who has head lice, or more rarely by contact with items such as combs, brushes, hats, scarves or pillowcases which have been recently used by someone with head lice.

Some animals have lice, but lice which live on animals will not live on humans.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infested and developing symptoms)

The eggs usually hatch in 7 – 10 days.

Infectious period

(time during which an infested person can infect others)

As long as the eggs or lice are alive. Once hatched, the lice are capable of laying eggs after 10 days and lice live for up to 35 days on the scalp. They do not survive more than 2 days away from a human host.

Treatment

A number of head lice treatments are available without prescription. Follow directions on the packaging. Family members may also need treatment.

Seek medical advice before using treatments on pregnant or breastfeeding women, infants under two years old or people with sensitive skin or dermatitis.

Re-treatment after seven to 10 days is necessary because lice in unhatched eggs may not be killed by the first treatment.

If infestations persist despite correct insecticide use, medical advice should be sought on alternative methods of treatment.

Using conditioner and a fine tooth comb once a week may help to detect infestations early and minimise spread from person-to-person.

Control of spread

- > Family and close contacts should be inspected for signs of infestation and treated if infested.
- > A child with head lice does not need to be sent home from child care or school immediately but should be treated on the same day. Children may return to school the day after appropriate treatment has been given.
- > Concentrate on the head. It is not necessary to treat the house or classroom.
- > Combs and brushes should be cleaned with detergent and hot water.
- > Bed linen should be washed in hot water (60°C or more), or dried in a clothes dryer on the hot setting for at least 20 minutes.

Useful websites

- > **Healthy Heads without Headlice program**
<http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/branches/headlice/headlice-index.htm>
- > **Guidelines for the control of public health pests – lice, fleas, scabies, bird mites, bed bugs and ticks**
<http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environmental-health-index.htm>



Outbreaks of head lice are common in children in schools and institutions everywhere. They infest people of all socio-economic positions and age groups.