



integrated working



Head lice and Nits

Detection, Treatment and Prevention



West Suffolk
Clinical Commissioning Group

What are head lice? Head lice are small, grey-brown coloured insects. Young lice are the size of a pin-head, fully grown lice the size of a sesame seed. They usually cling to hair close to the scalp where it's warm; they have a constant food supply and it's where females lay eggs.

What are nits? After 7-10 days, eggs laid by female lice hatch. Nits are the leftover empty eggshells and are usually grey-white in colour.

Who can get head lice? Anyone! They are a very common problem but, particularly seem to affect 4-11 year olds.

What are the symptoms of having head lice? Most commonly: An itchy scalp. In some cases a rash may appear on the back of the neck.

How can I find out if I or members of my family have head lice? Wet detection combing is the most reliable method of head lice detection as lice remain still when they are wet. Follow the steps below to check members of the family's heads and ask someone to check your head.

- Wash hair with usual shampoo, rinse, apply a generous amount of conditioner to hair
- Brush hair out with an ordinary wide toothed comb or brush, straightening and untangling the hair as you go
- Comb hair again from root to tip using a louse detection comb (readily available to buy from your local pharmacy or supermarket)
- Slot teeth of the comb into the hair at the roots with the bevelled-edges of the comb lightly touching the scalp
- Draw the comb slowly down to the end of the hair and with each stroke, check the comb for lice. If lice are present wipe or rinse comb
- Repeat the process, section by section, until the whole head has been combed through
- Rinse out the conditioner then repeat the process
- Once completed remove all stray hairs from all combs and brushes used and then rinse them thoroughly in water

How can I treat head lice? There are two options for the treatment of head lice; wet combing or use of medicated lotions or sprays:

Option One: Wet combing. Follow the method for wet detection combing (above) and repeat on days 5, 9 and 13 for a minimum of 2 weeks. (This method is recommended for pregnant or breast-feeding women or children under 6 months old). **IF, at any point during this process, you find an adult sized louse, head lice have been caught again and you will need to treat for a further 2 weeks.**

Option Two: Medicated lotions or sprays. Available to purchase from your local pharmacy, these preparations should ONLY be used if a living louse has been found. Instructions for use can vary greatly so, speak to the Pharmacist and follow the information provided with the product very carefully. **Do not treat head lice with medicated lotions or sprays "just in case."** **Make sure head lice (not just nits) are definitely present before treating.** This is because head lice can become resistant to the use of these products and may become more difficult to treat.

Can I prevent against catching head lice in the future? It's not easy to prevent head lice as they are spread by close head-to-head contact. However, there are a few tips below that may be useful to prevent an infestation from taking hold or spreading to others.

- Perform detection combing on a weekly basis, especially on children in the 4-11 year old age bracket
- Encourage your child's school to take part in the National "Bug Busting" days that take place on or around 31st January, 15th June and 31st October
- During an infestation: wash clothing and bed linen on a high temperature (50°C or 122°F)

Other Information

- Metal nit combs are not recommended for louse detection and removal
- **Remember** that whatever the method of treatment, **always** check for lice on days 5,9 and 12/13 and **remove** them to avoid risk of continuing infestation

Compiled by: NHS West Suffolk CCG Medicines Management Team (June 2013)

Sources of Information as at June 2013: NHS Choices Website <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Head-lice/Pages/Introduction.aspx>; Community Hygiene Concern Website <http://www.chc.org/index.cfm>