



Essex Health Protection Unit

Further advice on any of the areas discussed or copies of this sheet may be obtained from the unit.
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Main office telephone 0845 1550069

Factsheet on Headlice

Introduction

- Headlice can affect people of all ages. They spread by climbing from head-to-head. This can happen anywhere when heads are close together – not just at school
- They cannot jump, fly or swim. They don't care if the hair is clean or dirty, or if it is short or long, straight or curly
- Headlice are small insects that stay close to the scalp. They can move quite quickly
- Nits are the egg cases left behind after a louse has hatched. Nits tend to be pale in colour. They do not move
- Headlice can live for up to 40 days, but often die prior to 14 days
- Female lice may lay 8 or 9 eggs each night
- Eggs take 7 to 10 days to hatch. Within 36 hours the baby louse has changed colour to blend in with the hair colour
- The young louse takes 7 to 10 days to reach adulthood and moults 3 times during this time

The best way for families to stop headlouse infestation is to check their heads regularly using a detector comb. Each person should have their own comb. Try to do this at least once a week.

How to detect Headlice

You need a fine-toothed detector comb

There are a number of different designs available. The more teeth per comb, the easier it will be to use. Combs with longer teeth are generally more effective than those with shorter teeth. It is easier to reach the scalp with longer toothed combs.

There is no evidence that battery operated combs are more effective than ordinary plastic or metal toothed combs.

Wash the hair and leave it wet. If conditioner is required to loosen tangles only use a minimal amount.

Comb the hair with an ordinary comb to remove any knots.

Using the detector comb, start at the top of the head making sure that the comb is touching the scalp, slowly comb to the ends of the hair.

Wipe the teeth of the comb with a tissue after each stroke and check for lice.

Repeat until the whole head has been checked. This should take about 15 minutes.

If there are headlice you will find them on the teeth of the comb. If this happens you will then need to check the whole family.

NEVER use insecticides to prevent infestation.

The best way to do this is to use your detector comb at least once a week.

How to Treat Headlice

If the person has been swimming within two days of the treatment the hair must be thoroughly washed to remove traces of chlorine.

Carbaryl, Malathion and the Pyrethroids (permethrin and phenothrin) are insecticides and are effective against headlice, but lice in some districts have developed resistance. Careful application of Dimeticone (Hedrin), which acts on the surface of headlice, is also effective.

Headlice infestation should be treated using lotion or liquid formulations. Shampoos are diluted too much in use to be effective. Alcohol based liquids/lotions are effective but water-based liquids/lotions are preferred in severe eczema, for patients with asthma, and small children. A contact time of 12 hours or overnight treatment is recommended for lotions and liquids; a 2-hour treatment is not sufficient to kill eggs.

In general, a course of treatment for headlice should be 2 applications of product 7 days apart. Lice emerging from any eggs that survive the first application should then be killed on the second application.

To overcome the development of resistance, a mosaic strategy is required whereby, if a course of treatment fails to cure, a different insecticide is used for the next course. If a course of treatment with either permethrin or phenothrin fails, then a non-pyrethroid parasitological product should be used for the next course. No more than 3 consecutive weekly applications for an insecticide is recommended. However Dimeticone (Hedrin) is not absorbed by the skin, and therefore it may be used repeatedly.

Carbaryl is only available by prescription, but Malathion and Pyrethroids may be purchased from a pharmacist.

Lotion must be applied to DRY hair in a well ventilated room.

The lotion should be applied by hand to the hair and rubbed into the scalp. Remember that headlice like to stay close to the skin and this is where the live eggs will be. Pay special attention to the areas around the ears and at the nape of the neck.

After the whole scalp is wet, comb the hair through with an ordinary comb and apply more lotion so that the whole length of hair is wet. Application to the whole length of hair is important for the Dimeticone to be effective.

Allow the hair to dry naturally, and avoid naked flames.

You will need at least one small bottle of lotion per head. More if the hair is very thick or long.

Use the detector comb at least three times in the next 7 days to remove dead headlice and identify any that are still alive.

Repeat the treatment 7 days later using another bottle of the same lotion. Always read the manufacturers instructions.

Wet Combing methods

Headlice may be mechanically removed by combing wet hair meticulously with a detection comb (probably for at least 30 minutes each time) over the whole scalp at 4-day intervals for a minimum of 2 weeks; hair conditioner or vegetable oil may be used to facilitate the process. Several products are available and some may be prescribable on the NHS.

Prevention

Remember that successful treatment will not prevent further infestation.

Regular use of the detection comb will prevent further headlouse infestation.

Use the detection comb after there has been contact with a person with headlice.

If large headlice are found there will only be a few. These few headlice will not have a chance to lay eggs if they are removed from the head. By removing them you have sorted the problem out.

Even if the headlice have managed to lay some eggs you can prevent the infestation from getting worse by continuing to comb every few days. Any eggs that were laid will hatch after about 7 days. They then take another week or so to reach maturity, and they can't lay any more eggs until then. If you comb frequently you will remove the young headlice before they are old enough to breed.

It is advisable to check young children's hair at least weekly with a detection comb.

There is no ‘magic cure’ for headlice.

Some people recommend natural remedies. These usually depend on oil or lotion being combed through the hair and it is the combing that helps, as none of these herbal remedies have proven insecticidal properties.

Can’t get rid of Headlice?

DID YOU

- Use enough lotion? On dry hair?
- Leave it 12 hours? Dry naturally?
- Check ALL close family & friends including adults?

Are you using a comb daily?

For further help ask your GP, nurse or health visitor.

