Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**

Head lice – What parents need to know

Whether your child's hair is long or short, clean or dirty, many families with school aged children and teenagers will have contact with head lice.

Be prepared and know how to treat and control head lice if there is an outbreak at your child's school.

What are head lice?

Head lice are tiny insect parasites that live in people's hair and feed on the skin on their head (scalp). They lay eggs (nits) on the hair closest to the scalp (hair shaft). Some lice can cause itching.

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

How do people catch head lice?

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

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

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

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

Signs and symptoms

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.

- 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 to check for head lice

Head lice can be difficult to find.
Start by checking the hair close to the scalp, especially behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Look for lice and eggs.

If you think head lice may be present, follow these four steps:

Step 1: Apply plenty of hair conditioner (generic 'home' brands are fine) to dry hair until all hair is covered. The conditioner slows the head lice down so they can be trapped in the comb. Comb the conditioner through the hair with an ordinary comb or brush.

Step 2: Separate the hair into sections. Gently comb each section one at a time with a metal fine-tooth 'nit comb' (available from most chemists) in four directions – forwards, backwards, left and right.

Step 3: After brushing through each section, wipe the conditioner from the comb onto a white paper towel and check towel for dark adult lice and paler hatchlings. You may need to use a magnifying glass and a strong light, such as sunlight, to see the lice, hatchlings and eggs. Continue combing and checking each section until all the hair has been checked.

Step 4: When you have finished, rinse the conditioner out and dry the hair.

It is a good idea to distract children while you check for head lice by offering them a favourite video, game or book.

How do I treat head lice?

To treat head lice you must get rid of all the lice. There are two ways to do this:

1. Try the 10-day hair conditioner and comb method
2. Buy and use head lice lotion or shampoo, and follow the instructions on the packet.

There is no need to treat the whole family unless they also have head lice.

The 10-day hair conditioner and comb method

This method is based on the **four steps** under 'How can I check for head lice?' and is repeated every other day over a 10 day period.

This method focuses on removing adult head lice from hair and breaking the egg-laying cycle.

Eggs hatch 7 to 10 days after being laid.

If you only do this method once and one or two adult head lice are missed, and the cycle of outbreaks will continue. By repeating the method over a 10 day period you increase the chance of removing all head lice until no eggs are left.

Remember – after **Step 3**, you may need to use your fingernails to remove any eggs that were missed during combing.

Head lice lotion or shampoo

If you choose to use head lice lotion or shampoo always read and follow the instructions carefully. The active ingredients in these treatments are insecticides (chemicals used to kill or control insects).

Three types have been shown to be effective and safe for treating head lice. These are permethrin, pyrethrin and malathion.

Some other treatments may not have been properly tested and may be ineffective, expensive or even unsafe.

Check the product label for active ingredients.

Remember – read and follow the instructions that come with the product.

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Warning

Any head lice product could cause a reaction and should not routinely be used when treating babies under six months, people with asthma, epilepsy, insecticide allergies, scalp conditions or very sensitive skin, and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

People who cannot use insecticides should try the 10-day hair conditioner treatment instead.

Key points about insecticides

- No head lice product is guaranteed to kill all eggs. Eggs which are not killed or removed manually will hatch 7 to 10 days after being laid.
- Before using the insecticide, rinse out any hair conditioner as it may stop the insecticide from working.
- If applying the treatment to someone else, cover their eyes to avoid getting the treatment in the person's eyes. A towel is a good way to do this.
- Following treatment, remove as many remaining eggs as possible with your fingernails. You may need to use a magnifying glass and a strong light, such as sunlight, to do this. Concentrate on 'live' eggs, which are found within 1 cm of the scalp.
- Some head lice may be resistant to an insecticide and will still be alive the morning after the treatment. If this happens, thoroughly wash out the first product and re-treat the hair the same day with a product containing a different insecticide. Alternatively, change to the 10-day hair conditioner treatment instead.
- To prevent skin irritation, do not repeat insecticide treatment more than three times, one week apart.

Household cleaning

Head lice and eggs do not survive long away from the scalp as they are human parasites.

Only pillowcases need to be washed and this should be done on the first day of treatment.

Important information for school-aged children

Under the *School Education Act 1999*, if your child has head lice a 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 ten days to ensure that all eggs and hatchlings have been removed.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

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