

Some facts about head lice

- Head lice are tiny insects. They do not have wings, so they cannot fly. Head lice have strong claws and swing from hair to hair – they cannot jump.
- Head lice can only survive on human heads. They live on the hair and suck blood from the scalp.
- Head lice must feed every six hours or they will die from dehydration.
- Head lice can only be spread from one person to another by direct head-to-head contact.
- The female louse lays five to 12 eggs per day (up to 300 in her life time). Eggs remain strongly glued to the hair, even after hatching. Eggs are sometimes called nits.
- Live eggs need the warmth and moisture of the scalp to hatch and will be found up to 1.5cm from the scalp. Eggs that are further than 1.5cm from the scalp are either dead or hatched and do not require further treatment.
- At any one time, it is possible to have adult head lice, young lice and eggs.
- Anyone can get head lice – they have no preferences for cleanliness, hair colour, hair type, ethnicity or age.
- Only the insects (adults and young lice) can move from one head to another. Eggs cannot spread. Dandruff and hair particles can be mistaken for eggs.
- Head lice are a nuisance but they do not cause disease or illness.

Checking for head lice

Itching is often the first thing that raises concern about head lice, however it is not a reliable sign of head lice.

Why check for head lice? You can have head lice and not know. Lice move fast in dry hair and are easy to miss. If you find head lice early, they are easier to treat.

Who should be checked for head lice? Everyone in the family - adults and children.

When to check for head lice? Check everyone once a week. If a close contact has head lice, keep checking every 2 days until no lice are found for 10 consecutive days.

How to check for head lice? Using hair conditioner and combing is the most effective way of finding head lice. Conditioner and combing can be used for detection and/or treatment. (For more information see Conditioner and combing: a technique for detection and/or treatment of head lice).

What exactly am I looking for? Adult and young head lice. Eggs will be glued to the hair. Those found within 1.5cm from the scalp mean an active condition. They will hatch and will need to be treated. If you find only eggs more than 1.5cm from the scalp and no adult or young lice, the condition is inactive and does not require treatment.

About head lice combs Head lice combs are very fine toothed, made from plastic or metal and are designed to remove head lice. Some combs also remove some eggs. There are different types available: plastic and metal. Metal head lice combs with cylindrical teeth remove head lice and eggs better than combs with flat teeth.

After treatment It is easy to check for head lice in the shower with wet hair, lots of conditioner and a fine tooth comb.

Tips for checking for head lice:

- Checking for head lice is easier to remember if you do it on the same day each week.
- Conditioner and combing is the most effective way of finding head lice and is also an effective way of treating head lice. The conditioner stuns the lice for some minutes so they can be easily removed. Conditioner and combing is cheap. It also avoids the use of head lice chemicals (insecticides). Conditioner and combing is easy for students to learn to do for themselves. Using conditioner and combing every two days between chemical treatments removes young lice as they hatch from the eggs.
- No insecticide will kill the eggs.

Conditioner and combing method for detection & treatment for head lice

You will need:

- hair conditioner
- an ordinary comb
- a fine tooth comb
- hair clips – if hair is long
- tissues or material
- good light
- a mirror if combing yourself
- a plastic container
- an old toothbrush, safety pin or dental floss

Technique:

1. Untangle dry hair with an ordinary comb.
2. Apply hair conditioner to dry hair. Use enough conditioner to thoroughly cover the whole scalp and all hair from the roots to tips.
3. Use the ordinary comb to evenly distribute conditioner and divide the hair into four or more sections using the hair clips. A mirror helps if combing yourself.
4. Change to a head lice comb.
5. Start with a section at the back of the head. Place the teeth of the head lice comb flat against the scalp. Comb the hair from the roots through to the tips.
6. Wipe the comb on the tissue or material after each stroke. In good light, check for head lice. Adult lice are easier to see – young lice are difficult to see. A magnifying glass will help. You may see some eggs.
7. Comb each section twice until you have combed the whole head. If the comb becomes clogged, use the old toothbrush, dental floss or safety pin to remove the head lice or eggs.
8. Repeat the conditioner and combing every 2 days until you find no more head lice for 10 consecutive days. You will be removing all the adult lice and any young lice that hatch from the eggs.
9. Place all tissues or material in a plastic bag, tie the top and put it in the bin.
10. Wash hair normally.
11. Soak combs in soapy hot water (just after boiling) for at least 30 seconds to ensure head lice are killed (this should be done by an adult). When the water has cooled, use an old toothbrush to remove the debris.