



# Managing head lice fact sheet

The incidence of head lice is a familiar occurrence in schools. Although they do not cause illness or disease, they can be spread quite easily and should be carefully managed.

Management of head lice is a collective response, that is; treatment is only effective if we all work together.

## What will the school do to manage head lice?

- Maintain the anonymity of students or other school community members who may have head lice.
- Modify class activities to reduce contact between students when we are notified that someone in the class may have head lice (individual students are not identified as having head lice). It should be noted that sharing of hats presents no risk. Researchers examined the hats worn by 1000 school children and found no head lice even when many head lice were found on the children's heads. Regardless, sharing of hats will be discouraged.
- Recommend that students tie long hair into a bun to reduce the chance of transmission.
- Keep families informed. When a student in your child's class has been identified as having head lice, you will receive an alert notice through EdSmart. Please assist the school by responding to the notice where requested.

## What do parents need to do?

- Regularly inspect your child's scalp and hair to detect the presence of lice or lice eggs
- Notify the school if your child is affected and advise when treatment has begun.
- Do not send your child with headlice to school until the day after treatment has commenced.

## How do I inspect for head lice?

Although very small, a single adult louse can be seen and is about the size of a sesame seed. They usually look like tan or brown dots. Unless the infestation is heavy, it is more likely that you will see nits (lice eggs) in your child's hair, rather than lice crawling around. A good method of checking your child's head is by parting the hair in small sections and checking for lice and nits with a fine-tooth comb close to the scalp, behind the ears, and around the nape of the neck. Good lighting and a magnifying glass may help this process. If you do find lice eggs or lice, please notify the school immediately. Students can return to school after treatment has commenced.





## What happens if your child gets head lice?



- DON'T PANIC – anyone can get head lice and help is available.
- Begin treatment immediately and check for effectiveness. (see Treating head lice section below).
- ALERT THE SCHOOL! It is most likely that others in the class also have head lice. We can then advise all families to check every 2 days (and treat if head lice are found). This decreases the chance of your child getting head lice back again.
- Check other family members for signs of lice.
- Send your child back to school as soon as effective treatment has commenced. Your child is not a risk to others as long as treatment has commenced.

## Treating head lice

Treatment should only be applied when live lice are found on the head. If more than one person in your family has been infested, treatment should be applied at the same time to break the cycle. The following strategies are ineffective and should be avoided.

- Shaving the head or cutting the hair a short length.
- Treatment of inanimate objects such as clothes, furniture, carpets or car interiors.
- Over-use of chemical treatment options by families.
- Treatment of every member of the household unless every person has evident lice.

There are two main methods of treating head lice, with conditioning and combing being the preferred and more effective method.

### 1. Conditioner and combing technique

Generic hair conditioner stuns lice and blocks their breathing pores. This, together with the slippery effect of the conditioner, makes it easier to manually remove the lice. As well as being cheaper, this treatment method is considered more effective than insecticidal or other chemical treatments but generally requires longer treatment times. Research suggests that around 98% of head lice may not be susceptible to currently available head lice insecticides.

**Step 1:** Generously apply conditioner to **dry hair** to cover the scalp and the full length of the hair. White conditioner makes the lice or nits easier to spot.

**Step 2.** Untangle the hair with a wide-toothed comb.

**Step 3.** Place a fine-toothed headlice comb flat against the scalp and draw the comb through each section of hair from the roots to the ends.

**Step 4.** Wipe the comb after each stroke onto a tissue/paper towel, checking each time for lice or nits.



**Step 5.** Comb each section of hair at least five times.

**Step 6.** Wash the hair as normal.

**Step 7.** Scrub both combs with an old toothbrush to remove an eggs or lice that may be present.

Repeat the conditioner and combing method every second day to remove young lice as they hatch. Continue for ten or so consecutive days until no lice are found.



Generic plastic head lice combs are considered very effective. They are soft on the scalp and when used with conditioner, they remove most head lice and some eggs. These brushes can easily be cleaned with an old toothbrush.



Metal combs with cylindrical teeth are also highly effective. They are soft on the scalp and when used with conditioner, they remove most head lice and most eggs. Dental floss will remove the eggs and hair debris which may clog the base of the comb.

*Note:* Flat metal combs can scratch the scalp and tangle long hair. Electronic head lice combs do not remove eggs, can only be used on short hair, and cannot be used on wet hair.

## **2. Treatment with synthetic or natural insecticides or other chemicals**

There are different forms of treatment which you can get from the chemist without a prescription. All preparations must be applied strictly according to the manufacturer's instructions and none of them should be used on children under two years of age, except on medical advice. No chemical treatment kills all the eggs. Given that use of an insecticide can lead to insecticide resistance, does not kill the eggs (nits), and a comb is still required anyway to remove any dead lice, the comb and conditioner techniques is the preferred treatment method.

- A second treatment may need to be applied 7-10 days after the initial treatment to kill the young lice that have hatched from the eggs remaining from the first treatment. Always check with the treatment instructions to confirm if this is required.
- Unless directed otherwise, do not apply the treatment more than once per week as more frequent applications could lead to scalp problems and have little or no effect.
- Nits are the most difficult to kill. The most effective way to remove eggs is to pull them off the hair using your fingernails or using the [conditioner and combing technique](#) above.



## Common myths about head lice

### Head lice spread disease

**Incorrect.** Head lice do not spread disease, and the most common symptom is itching. Head lice are more of a health risk for parents due to stress, rather than any real physical threat to children.

### You need to clean bedding, hats, towels etc. if someone has head lice

**Incorrect.** Head lice are designed for climbing on shafts of hair, and do not linger around on fabrics. They are also very fragile, and do not survive for long off the scalp. Head lice can not jump, fly or swim, and they require direct hair contact to spread. This is why primary school kids (particularly those with longer hair) tend to get head lice; as they tend to crowd around tablets, books or smartphones. That's right: even selfies can promote head lice transmission.

### Head lice are a sign of child neglect or poor hygiene

**Incorrect.** There is no evidence to support the claim that head lice refer dirty hair to clean hair, and other animals such as cats or dogs play no part in the transmission.

### Using an insecticide is easier and better than combing

**Incorrect.** In fact, using an insecticide that doesn't kill the lice often results in them building a further resistance to it. Also, even where insecticides do work, they do not kill the eggs. Whilst it takes some patience and perseverance, the conditioner and comb technique is much more effective, and is the preferred treatment method.

### Putting insect repellent on your hair protects from lice

**Incorrect.** Whilst there are products claiming to be head lice repellents, there is absolutely no evidence to support their effectiveness. Head lice infestations can go on for weeks, so even if you have successfully treated your child, they could become reinfested. Some of the best measures are keeping your child's hair short or tying long hair up in a ponytail or bun.

### A hair straightener is an effective treatment

**Incorrect.** Hair straighteners will kill lice on hair strands, but a vast majority of lice and their eggs will be on the scalp where the hair straightener cannot reach them. This essentially makes hair straighteners ineffective in treating head lice.

### Electric head lice combs are the most effective

**Incorrect.** Electric head lice combs have shown no more effectiveness than a regular comb, and they can normally only be used on short hair, and not when it is wet. They are often marketed as being quicker than traditional comb and conditioner techniques but considering they can't be used with conditioner (which stuns the lice) we could consider electric combs to be much less effective. Getting rid of head lice takes patience and perseverance, so don't be fooled by gadgets or gimmicks that claim to make this easier.