

HEADLICE

INTRODUCTION

Head lice (*Pediculus capitis*) affects only humans, and cannot be passed on to, or caught from animals. Head lice are common in schoolchildren, particularly between the ages of 4 and 11, but anyone with hair can catch them. The lice are small wingless insects that feed on blood obtained by biting the scalp. These bites tend to be itchy and this itchiness is caused by an allergy to the lice. Female lice lay their eggs at the hair roots, particularly near warm areas behind the ears and at the back of neck. These eggs appear as white or white coloured grains and are best removed with a fine comb while the hair is wet.

SYMPTOMS

Infestation often causes itching of the scalp, but may also go unnoticed. If you suspect head lice, check the base of hairs for eggs and comb the hair over a piece of white paper and the lice will appear as pink or brown specks. Sometimes an infestation is marked by tiny red spots on the scalp. Lice may be visible in the hair behind the ears and at the nape of the neck as these are favourite spots for infestations.

CAUSES

Head lice are transferred by close hair-to-hair contact. They cannot jump, fly or swim, but walk from one hair to another. It is a misconception that head lice infestation is as a result of dirty hair and poor hygiene. Head lice can be found in all hair types, long or short, and in hair of any condition.

TREATMENT

Head lice are difficult to remove because of their size, re-infestation rate, life cycle, and their ability to develop immunity to insecticides. Lice can be a persistent and recurring nuisance, so it is important to treat them quickly and thoroughly.

WET COMBING METHOD

Wet combing, is used to remove lice without using chemical treatments. This method can be helpful because head lice are growing increasingly resistant to the insecticides used to remove them. The best procedure is as follows:

- Wash the hair as normal using an ordinary shampoo.
- Apply conditioner liberally to wet hair (this causes lice to lose their grip on hair).
- Comb the hair through with a normal comb first.
- With a fine tooth nit comb, comb from the roots along the complete length of the hair and after each stroke check the comb for lice and wipe it clean. Work methodically over the whole head for at least 30 minutes.
- Rinse the hair as normal.
- Repeat every three days for at least two weeks.

MEDICATED LOTION OR RINSE

Only use a lotion if you find a living (moving) head louse. Apply the preparation according to the instructions, and remove the lice and eggs with a fine-toothed nit comb. Treatment should only be done once and then repeated seven days later. Water based treatments (e.g.) Derbac M[®] are safer to use for asthmatics, patients with eczema, pregnant women and babies. There is no need to wash clothing, or bedding, if they have come into contact with head lice. This is because head lice quickly die without a host to provide warmth and food.

ELECTRONIC LICE COMB

RobiComb[®] is an electronic lice comb available in Whelehans. It detects and kills lice without the need for chemicals. It uses a AA battery.

PREVENTION

The best prevention for head lice infestation is normal hair care and checking yours and your family's hair and scalp periodically. If your child has long hair, tie it back as this helps to reduce the likelihood of contact between their hair and that of an infected child. Regular combing of hair using the "wet combing" method (see above) can help with early detection as well as treatment. Repellants such as Lyclear[®] Repellant can help to prevent head lice but effectiveness is unclear. Whelehans have very affordable insect repellants starting from €2.98. Tea Tree shampoo sells well as a natural insect repellent shampoo in Whelehans pharmacy.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

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