

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Head lice

**Head lice are basically harmless, although they may make your head feel itchy. They're quite easy to treat, but it's a nuisance when children get them repeatedly.**

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are right for you.

### What are head lice?

Head lice are small insects that live on people's scalps. They spread from one person to another, usually through head-to-head contact.

Having head lice is nothing to be ashamed of. It doesn't mean you don't keep yourself clean. Head lice can't tell the difference between clean hair and dirty hair.

Sometimes head lice are called nits, even though the word 'nits' really means the shells of their eggs.

You can catch head lice if your hair touches the hair of someone who has them. But head lice move slowly. Your hair needs to be touching someone else's hair for about half a minute to catch lice. You're very unlikely to catch them from using someone else's hat, or pillow. Lice don't live very long away from the scalp.

### How do I know whether I have head lice?

It can take awhile to find out you have head lice. They are not easy to see, so you may not notice them straight away.

Sometimes head lice make your head itch. But the only definite way to know that you have head lice is to find a live louse in your hair. Finding something that looks like a louse egg or nit does not mean that you have head lice. They might be left over from an earlier infestation.

A fully grown head louse is flat and about the size of a sesame seed. Although some people assume head lice can fly, they don't have wings. Head lice are usually greyish-brown, but the colour can vary. They are quite hard to spot, but you may find them when you comb your hair.

### What treatments work?

There are two basic ways to try to get rid of head lice. You can either try to remove them by combing them out, or use a chemical treatment (insecticide) to kill them. Both can work if you use them properly.

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Killing lice with an insecticide lotion is more likely to work, but some people worry about the safety of insecticides and don't like using them repeatedly. Head lice treatments are safe if you follow the instructions.

Sometimes insecticides don't work because the lice have become resistant to the chemicals (this means that the chemicals will no longer kill all the lice). If this happens, you will have to try a different treatment.

### Chemical treatments

Lotions that poison head lice are called insecticides. They might not work if head lice have become resistant to them in the area where you live. Ask your doctor or pharmacist which treatment is likely to work best in your area.

The one most likely to work for most people is called **malathion**. Malathion kills both head lice and their eggs. It should get rid of all the head lice after one treatment. Your doctor may suggest you use it again after one week, to be certain. It works for about 9 in 10 people.

Some people are concerned that chemicals like malathion can cause serious health damage, including dizziness and numbness. But experts say there is nothing to show that the low doses of malathion used for head lice treatments are harmful.

You can buy malathion from a pharmacy. Brand names include Derbac-M, Prioderm, and Suleo-M. You have to leave malathion on your head for 12 hours for it to work properly. It has a strong smell, which you may find unpleasant. Also, most malathion treatments contain alcohol, so they could catch alight. Keep yourself or your children away from flames or sparks when using this treatment.

There are two other insecticides used for getting rid of head lice. They are called **permethrin** and **phenothrin**.

There is some research to show that permethrin can get rid of head lice. But the only permethrin product available for head lice in the UK is not recommended by doctors. It's called Lyclear Crème Rinse and you can buy it from pharmacies. It's quite diluted, and is washed off after 10 minutes. Lyclear may not be concentrated enough, or left on the hair long enough, for permethrin to work. Some people say it stings their head or gives them a rash.

There's not much research to show how well phenothrin works. Phenothrin comes as a lotion, a liquid, and a mousse. The brand name is Full Marks. You will need to do a second application seven to 10 days later. Some people get a mild skin rash.

A fairly new treatment called **dimeticone** (brand name Hedrin) works by killing head lice, but it's not an insecticide. It is made from silicone. It seems to work by coating the lice so water can't get in or out of their bodies. Because it is not an insecticide, head lice are less likely to be resistant to it.

There has not been much research into dimeticone. Some people find it itches or stings, but this is less common than with other treatments such as permethrin.

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### Removing head lice by combing

Combing wet hair with a special comb is sometimes called 'bug-busting'. It involves thoroughly combing wet hair, using a comb with very fine teeth that can pick out lice. You can buy these combs in a pharmacy. The product is called the Bug Buster Kit.

The idea is that by removing lice, you'll stop them laying eggs. After about two weeks, all the lice should have been removed. You need to carefully comb through your hair, or your child's hair, every four days for at least two weeks, to catch any newly hatched lice. You should keep carrying it out until you have found no lice for at least three combing sessions in a row.

Some research shows this can work. But many parents find combing hard to do thoroughly.

You can also buy electric combs that are supposed to kill head lice with a small shock. But there's no proper research to show whether they work.

Some people try covering the hair in a thick substance such as grease, olive oil, styling gel, or even mayonnaise to suffocate the head lice before combing them out. But there's no evidence to show whether this helps.

### Other treatments

You can buy **head lice repellents** from chemists and health shops. Some people also put herbal oils, such as citronella and tea tree oil, in their child's hair to repel head lice. But there's not been much research into these treatments.

Some people use mixtures of **herbal oils** and **aromatherapy oils** to try to get rid of head lice. There is no standard combination of herbal oils to treat head lice, so it's hard to research how well they work. There's not much research into these treatments.

### What will happen?

Head lice are rarely a serious problem, but they can be annoying. And if you don't get rid of them, they can spread to other people.

If you don't treat head lice, the problem will get worse as the lice breed. You or your child will probably be annoyed by itching and bites. You or your child could also get an infection from the bites, although this is rare.

Head lice will not clear up on their own, so you shouldn't ignore them. It's easier to get rid of them if you treat them quickly.

Tell people you or your child has close contact with, even if you find this difficult. They can then check their hair or their children's hair. Head lice spread easily in families and schools. If you don't tell people, the lice will spread in your community and you or your child might catch them again.

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