

Head lice

Description

Head lice are a common problem throughout the world, and can affect any child in any community.

Head lice are insects that live in hair and suck blood from the scalp. They are a nuisance because they can cause itching of the scalp, but they do not cause disease or illness. Although the lice themselves do not carry disease children often scratch so much that infections occur on the scalp.

Head lice are small flat insects 2-3mm in length and are tan/greyish/white in colour. They live on the human scalp because they like warmth and feed on blood several times a day. Female head lice lay their eggs and glue them to the base of the hair. The females lay more eggs every six to ten days. Breaking this cycle is important.

You will find most eggs (nits) behind the ears and the nape of the neck; they are very small pale cream to yellowish brown in colour and hatch after seven to ten days. The immature lice grow into adults over six to ten days.

How does it spread?

Head lice can only be spread from one person to another by direct head-to-head contact – the lice cannot jump or fly. Head lice do not live or breed on animals, bedding, furniture, carpets, clothes or soft toys.

Lice in a person's hair can be at various stages of their life cycle, so new eggs can be laid and new lice can hatch continuously.

Infectious period

As long as the eggs or lice are alive they can spread to other people by direct head-to-head contact.

Exclusion period

A child with live lice should not attend their early childhood centre. The child may return to the centre as soon as treatment has started. Treatment is when all the lice are dead.

Responsibilities of staff

- Tell parents there are head lice at the centre. If one child in a class has head lice, it is likely that several others also have them.
- Put information about head lice on your notice board. Support parents and children who have head lice by providing useful information about effective treatment.
- Do not isolate a child who has head lice, it does not make sense and can be humiliating for the child.
- While you have children with head lice ensure all dress ups are put away.
- Recommend that staff and children tie back long hair to reduce the chance of spread.

Responsibilities of parents

- Check your child's head once a week for head lice. Keeping head lice under control requires the support of the whole centre whānau. If you find any lice or eggs, begin treatment as soon as possible.
- Your child can go back to their centre as soon as treatment has started.
- Check for head lice in other family members as well.
- Do not share brushes, combs or hats and encourage children to brush their hair every night.

Head lice

Treatment

If one member of the household has head lice, you will need to treat all family members in the household.

Wet Combing

This can be effective if done properly as combing damages the egg, preventing it from hatching. If eggs do hatch then daily combing will remove the young lice before they can reproduce.

- Use lots of conditioner on dry hair to cover the whole scalp and all of the hair from roots to tip. The conditioner will slow down the head lice for approximately 20 minutes so leave the conditioner in the hair.
- Divide the hair into small sections and comb carefully from the roots to the tip. Use a metal fine-toothed nit comb but remember to wipe the comb clean with a clean tissue in between strokes.
- Wash out the conditioner after checking the hair carefully.
- Repeat the combing twice more on consecutive nights and then weekly.

Chemical treatment

Several chemical treatments (insecticides) are available to treat head lice. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for effective treatment.

The malathion based treatments are subsidised on prescription. Malathion cannot be used on children under six months of age.

After using the treatment:

- Check all members of the household daily for at least three weeks.
- Comb the hair carefully to remove as many dead or live head lice and eggs as possible, eggs may also be removed using your finger and thumb.
- Check the manufacturer's instructions as some treatments need to be used twice.