

Head lice

Head lice | Nits | Headlouse | Kutis | Cooties | Kutu bugs

What are head lice?

Head lice are small flat insects, about 2–3 mm long. They live on the scalp (the skin on a person's head where the hair grows from). Head lice lay their eggs (nits) on strands of hair.

Anyone can get head lice – it doesn't matter how clean or dirty a person's hair is. Head lice spread by crawling from one person's hair to another's – usually between people who are in close contact, such as family or school classmates.

Head lice:

- cannot jump, fly or swim
- do not carry disease
- stay on the scalp after swimming or bathing/showering

What do head lice look like?

Insects

Head lice can be white, brown or dark grey. They are usually in the hair at the back of the neck or behind the ears.

Eggs (nits)

Female head lice lay about 7–10 eggs each night. The eggs are small and hard (like a grain of salt) and are normally pale grey in colour. Eggs are laid close to the scalp and are firmly glued to strands of hair. After hatching, the empty egg cases are white.

Eggs hatch in 9 days, and head lice live for 40 days.

Checking for head lice

In school-age children check for head lice often, at least once a week. Scratching, scratch marks or a rash can be a sign that your child has head lice. But not all children complain of itchy heads.

At least once a week, check the scalp for head lice insects and eggs, especially:

- around the hairline at the back of the neck
- behind the ears
- on the crown (top of the head)

Treating head lice

Chemical treatments or wet combing are the usual ways to treat head lice. Talk to your pharmacist, doctor or nurse for advice.

Ordinary shampoo or soap will not kill head lice.

Do not use fly spray, kerosene or animal treatments, as these may harm children.

Chemical treatments

- Chemical treatments use a special shampoo or lotion (containing insecticide) that kills the head lice and the eggs. Follow the instructions that are supplied with the chemical treatments.
- **Always do a second treatment** 7–10 days after the first. This is to kill any head lice that may have hatched after the first treatment.

Stop head lice from spreading

It's not possible to completely prevent head lice because they're very common. But there are things you can do to stop head lice from spreading.

- Brush hair every day. This may help kill or injure head lice and stop them from laying eggs.
- Don't share brushes, combs, headbands, ribbons, hairclips, helmets or hats – anything that touches someone's head.
- Having short hair – or wearing hair in a ponytail if it's long – makes it less likely you or your child will catch head lice.
- Children should hang their clothes on their own hook at school.
- Children should keep their clothes apart from other children's in swimming or sport changing rooms.
- If you do get head lice in your family, everyone that has them should be treated at the same time.
- Let the school and any other close friends know that your child has been treated for head lice.

Remember:

- Anyone can get head lice.
- Check your children's hair every week for head lice.
- If you find head lice or eggs – you need to treat them.
- Repeat the treatment: 7–10 days later for chemical treatments, and at least every 2 to 3 days for wet combing.
- For more information, talk to your pharmacist, doctor or nurse.



Step by step for treating head lice with 4 percent (4%) dimethicone lotion

- put the lotion on to dry hair
- work it in around the head and cover the hair right to the ends
- use enough lotion to completely moisten the hair and scalp
- comb the hair with an ordinary comb to make sure the lotion covers all the hair evenly
- leave the lotion to dry naturally
- wait at least 8 hours before washing the hair with your normal shampoo (you can leave it on overnight)
- there's no need to cover the hair with a wrap
- head lice can't move within a minute of being covered with 4 percent (4%) dimethicone lotion
- you can use a fine-tooth head lice comb to remove remaining eggs after treatment and any dead lice which were not washed out - this step is not essential
- repeat in 7 days (this is very important)

The School Nurse can provide free dimethicone lotion. Your GP can also prescribe it for children for free.

(<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/dimethicone-lotion-treating-head-lice>)