

Head Lice

Head lice are a common problem. They mostly affect children, but adults can have them too. They are small insects that live on the human scalp. As they do not have wings they cannot fly. They also cannot jump or hop. An adult louse is about the size of a sesame seed. As they are so small they can be difficult to spot. The empty white egg cases (nits), from which the lice have hatched, may be detected more easily as they are glued to the hair. The presence of nits does not always mean that live lice are present. The most likely places to find head lice are at the back of the neck and behind the ears.

Head lice are passed from one person to another by direct head to head contact, (friends whispering to each other, goodnight cuddles etc.), and therefore can spread easily. It is possible that they can be spread by the sharing of hats, combs and brushes. Head lice do not live in bedding, clothing or furniture. Head lice cannot be caught from family pets or other animals as they are a human parasite.

Checking for lice

The best way to check for the presence of head lice is by carrying out the wet combing method of detection. Because they are so easily passed on within families, when one person is affected, all members of the family should have their hair checked. Only members of the family who are found to have live lice should be treated.

Wet combing detection method

You will need; a plastic detection comb (teeth spacing of less than 0.25 mm - available from most chemists), any brand of hair conditioner, (the purpose of the conditioner is that it makes the hair too slippery for the head lice to hold on to), a piece of white paper and good light. Before detecting for lice you may need to untangle the hair using an ordinary comb.

Fine metal combs are not recommended as they can damage the skin and pull the hair, which can cause it to break off at the root.

- Wash the hair with ordinary shampoo (any brand), rinse then towel dry. The hair should be damp.
- Apply hair conditioner. Do not rinse off. (A '2 in 1' shampoo and conditioner preparation is not suitable).
- Starting with the teeth of the detection comb touching the skin of the scalp at the top of the head, comb carefully towards the end of the hair onto the piece of paper. This aids visible identification.
- Look carefully at the teeth of the comb in good light: any head lice will be caught between the teeth. Wipe the comb on the white paper between strokes.
- Do this repeatedly from the top of the head to the end of the hair, working all the way round the head.
- The process will take a minimum of 15 minutes to be performed effectively.
- Rinse conditioner out of the hair.
- Dry hair as normal.
- Wash the comb with warm soapy water.

(Wet combing is a method of detection but it can also be used as a treatment method if you do not wish to use any lotions. However it is essential to carry out the above method correctly, for the minimum 15 minutes, 3 times at intervals of 4 days.)

Recommended treatment - Hedrin* lotion

Treatment should only be started when living lice have been shown to be present. To ensure that the treatment works it is important that it is applied correctly as per the manufacturer's instructions.

Hedrin is odourless, colourless and does not contain neurotoxic insecticides. It contains 4% dimeticone (a silicone), in a silicone base called cyclomethicone. Both silicones are used extensively in cosmetics and toiletries. The product dries by the evaporation of the cyclomethicone, leaving the dimeticone fully encapsulating the lice, which is killed by it not being able to function. As Hedrin kills lice physically rather than by poisoning, it is effective against lice resistant to insecticide treatments. Lice cannot become resistant to Hedrin.

As Hedrin is not absorbed through the skin it can be used on children (from six months of age) and can be recommended for asthmatics, pregnant and breast feeding mothers. It can also be used repeatedly as required. In a clinical trial 2% of patients reported irritant reactions to dimeticone and 9% to phenothrin – an insecticide found in other head lice treatments.

Hedrin is a two- dose treatment. It should be applied to dry hair, ensuring that the hair is fully covered from roots to tip, and should be left to dry for 8 hours or left on over night. The hair can then be washed and combed in the usual way to remove dead lice. The nits can be removed with the fingers or a fine toothed comb. A second treatment should be applied after 7 days to deal with any eggs that may have hatched since the first application. To check the treatment has been effective, use a detector comb 24 hours after second treatment. If live lice are found then the entire treatment should be repeated until no live lice are found. A 50ml bottle should be sufficient for a two – dose treatment of short hair. Longer hair or multiple treatments will require a 150ml bottle.

Prevention

- It is recommended that those households with school age children (particularly nursery and primary school age); make wet combing a weekly activity for all members of the household.
- Hair brushes, combs and hats should not be shared. It is unlikely that head lice are transferred in this way, but if a hair brush is used immediately after someone with head lice there is potential for a louse to be transferred.
- Long hair should be tied back to reduce contact with other children's hair.

If you have any queries or concerns please don't hesitate to contact the School Nurse Team on:

Information taken from: Leicestershire County and Rutland Guidelines for the Management of Patients with Head Lice in Community Hospitals and Primary Care. The Treatment of Head Lice by Dr Philip Monk.

* Please note: there are a number of products available to treat headlice, and it is recommended that you speak to your local pharmacist about other products that can be used.

If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format (such as large print, Braille or audio) please ask a member of staff.

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