



Head Lice

Patient information leaflet



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Common Ailments Service

Only use this leaflet if your pharmacist has advised you about your or your child's condition.

Head lice are tiny grey-brown insects that live in hair. Nits are the yellow-white eggshells which are left attached to the hair after the lice hatch. Head lice are spread by close head-to-head contact and are more common in young children. Head lice are not a sign of having dirty hair. There is no need to keep your child off school if they have head lice.



A head louse

Head lice can make the head feel very itchy or like something is moving in the hair. However, many people with head lice do not have symptoms.



Nits attached to hair

Finding head lice

The only way to be sure someone has head lice is by finding a live louse. If a louse is found, check everyone in the household for head lice and treat anyone who has live lice as soon as possible. Check the hair using a louse detection comb. This is a fine-toothed comb which can find live lice in wet or dry hair.

Lice move less when they are wet so combing wet hair with conditioner is a more reliable way of finding lice than combing dry hair. You can also use wet combing to treat head lice. Good lighting and a magnifying glass will help you to see the lice better.

Dry combing

To find head lice in dry hair you should:

1. Untangle the hair with an ordinary wide-toothed comb.
2. Divide the hair into small sections.
3. Switch to the fine-toothed detection comb.
4. Comb the hair from the roots (touching the scalp) to the tips working your way around the head.
5. Comb each section of hair 3 to 4 times, then move to the next section until all the hair has been combed.
6. Look for lice as you comb through the hair. If you see a louse, use your thumb to trap it against the face of the comb.

Dry detection combing takes 3 to 5 minutes per head, depending on hair length and type – long, frizzy or curly hair will take longer.

Wet combing

To find (or treat) head lice in wet hair you should:

1. Wash the hair with ordinary shampoo.
2. Put plenty of conditioner on the hair and leave it on.
3. Untangle the hair with an ordinary wide-toothed comb.
4. Comb all of the hair with the fine-toothed detection comb, from the roots (touching the scalp) to the ends. Check the comb for lice after each stroke.
5. Wipe or rinse the comb to remove any lice.
6. Rinse out the conditioner then repeat the combing procedure on the wet hair.

It usually takes about 10 minutes to wet comb short hair, and 20 to 30 minutes for long, frizzy or curly hair.



Treatment and Prevention

Wet combing

You can treat head lice by wet combing with a louse detection comb. Use the wet combing method described above to remove the lice and nits. Wet comb on the first day you see head lice, and 5, 9 and 13 days after to catch any newly hatched lice.

On day 17, use a detection comb to check the hair of everyone in the household again. If you still see live lice, ask your pharmacist for advice on other ways to treat head lice.

Medicines that can help

These medicines are not suitable for everyone. Make sure you have asked your pharmacist for advice about what treatment is best for you or your child.

Insecticides

There are two different types of insecticides: physical and chemical. Both types kill head lice. You can use an insecticide instead of combing or if combing has not worked.

When you use an insecticide:

- treat all household members who have live lice on the same day (some products are not suitable for very young children so check with your pharmacist or on the product label)
- apply the treatment to all areas of the scalp and to all of the hairs, from the roots to the tips
- read the instructions that come with the treatment to make sure you are using it safely

There is a risk of serious burns if the head lice product catches fire. Do not smoke around treated hair. Until you wash the hair, keep away from flames, cigarettes, and anything that could set fire to it.

Comb the hair with a detection comb after treatment to check for live lice. Go back to your pharmacist for more advice if the treatment has not worked. Even after successful treatment, you may find nits (empty louse eggs), and the head can still be itchy for 2 to 3 weeks.

Physical insecticides

You may decide with your pharmacist to use a physical insecticide such as **dimeticone** (e.g. Hedrin®), **isopropyl myristate** and **cyclomethicone** (e.g. Full Marks Solution®) or **isopropyl alcohol** and **benzyl alcohol mousse** (e.g. Vamousse®). Physical insecticides work by smothering the lice.

Chemical insecticides

Alternatively, your pharmacist may recommend a chemical insecticide such as **malathion** (e.g. Derbac M®). These work by poisoning the head lice.

Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine.

If you are concerned about any side effects from a treatment, report it to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. You can also report side effects on the Yellow Card [app](#) or [website](#).



Treatment and Prevention

Prevention

There is no good way to prevent head lice, but regular dry or wet combing can help to catch lice early and stop them spreading.



When to Get Help

Contact your GP or call 111 if you or your child has:

- a high temperature and red, swollen skin on the head that may have crusts or fluid leaking out – the skin may be infected

If you are worried that your or your child's condition is not getting better, or is getting worse, talk to your GP.



More information

For more information on head lice or a medicine, talk to your pharmacist or look at the following websites:

Patient UK: <https://patient.info/childrens-health/head-lice-and-nits>

NHS website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/head-lice-and-nits/>

Medicines A-Z: <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/>

Information from the above resources is included in this leaflet.



Mae'r daflen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This leaflet is also available in Welsh.

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