

HEAD LICE

Head lice are parasitic insects called *Pediculus humanus capitis*. They only live on the heads of people.

There are three forms of head lice:

Nits are head lice eggs. The oval, yellowy white eggs are hard to see and may be confused with dandruff. They attach themselves to the hair shaft and take about a week to hatch. The eggs remain after hatching and many nits are empty egg cases. Nymphs hatch from the nits. The baby lice look like the adults, but are smaller. They take about 7 days to mature to adults and feed on blood to survive.

Adults are about the size of a sesame seed. They have six legs and are tan to greyish-white. The legs have hook-like claws to hold onto the hair with. Adults can live up to 30 days and feed on blood.

Head lice cannot jump, hop or swim. They will not be passed on through the swimming pool water, only by direct contact from hair to hair, however neither will the swimming pool water kill them, if this were the case we would have an effective cure.

Anyone can catch head lice, but preschool children, primary school children and their families are most at risk.

Head lice are transmitted through direct, prolonged head-to-head contact with an infested person. This is especially common during play or sport at school and with close contacts at home.

Transmission is possible through infected clothes, combs, brushes or towels, but extremely unlikely. The lifespan of a louse is very short once detached from the hair so fumigation is not necessary. The rate of transmission is low.

Head lice are not a serious health problem. Head lice rarely cause anything more than an itchy scalp.

Head lice are a mild disease. Some schools used to have routine screening, followed by the exclusion of those affected. This was a waste of time. It was also ineffective in preventing spread. The best way to stop infection is for people to learn how to check their heads for lice. Good hair care only helps to control lice in as much as it will help to spot and treat lice early.

A child with head lice should not be kept off school or excluded from swimming.

The DfEE/DoH guidelines for infection control in schools and nurseries state that there is no need for a child who has head lice to stay away from school. One reason for this is that if a child does have lice, he or she will have had them at school for several weeks before diagnosis.

Letters notifying other parents of cases have not been found to curtail spread but often provoke itching and anxiety as a psychological response.

Head lice are not a sign of dirty hair or poor habits of cleanliness the lice prefer clean hair and scalps.

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