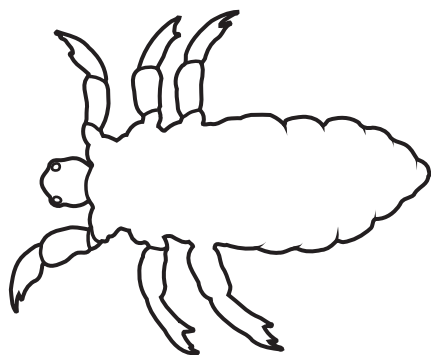


# Lice: head lice

## What are head lice?

*Pediculus humanus capitis* is the head louse. This small insect, which lives on human hair, sucks blood from the skin of the scalp. It has no wings and can only crawl. The female louse lays eggs (or 'nits'), which are glued to the hairs and hatch within 6 days, mature into adults in about 10 days and live for about a month.



actual size  
of mature louse



actual size  
of nit on hair



An adult head louse

## How are they spread?

Head lice spread from person to person by direct contact, such as sitting and working very close to each other. They can spread by sharing combs, brushes, headwear, towels and pillowcases, especially within the family. Children are the ones usually affected, but people of all ages and from all walks of life can be infested. It is more common in overcrowded living conditions.

## What are the symptoms?

Head lice may cause itching of the scalp, but often there are no symptoms. The white spots can be mistaken for dandruff.

## How is it diagnosed?

The finding of lice or nits on the head is the only way to diagnose infestation. The nits are seen as small, whitish flecks securely attached to the base of the hairs, especially behind the ears, on the back of the head and near the forehead. Unlike dandruff, they cannot be brushed off.

## What is the treatment?

### Topical medication

The best treatment is a permethrin scalp preparation or pyrethrin/piperonyl butoxide (Lyban) foam shampoo or

conditioner, which are effective in killing both the lice and eggs. Malathion is also useful, especially if the lice are resistant to permethrin. Lindane is less effective and does not kill the eggs. Follow the instructions on the bottle carefully. The hair does not have to be cut short if the medication is properly and thoroughly applied. Shampoos are used on wet hair while lotions are used on dry hair.

### Where should it be applied?

Apply to all the hair of the head only.

### Method

- Massage well into wet hair.
- Leave at least 10 minutes (or as directed on the medication label).
- Wash off thoroughly (avoid eye contact).
- Repeat after 7 days.

### How often?

Apply once a week for 2 weeks. Two applications should be sufficient to clear the lice.

### Combing

The eggs can be removed after treatment by combing with a fine-tooth metal comb while the hair is wet.

### Eyelashes and eyebrows

If the nits are present, apply Vaseline in a thick layer twice a day for 8 days.

## Note

- Head lice are *not* associated with lack of cleanliness.
- Ordinary hair washing cannot prevent or cure them.
- If one member of the family has them, *all* members must be examined and treated if lice or nits can be detected.
- The source of head lice is the home, not the school.
- Wash pillow cases on a hot cycle or put in a clothes dryer on the hot setting for 10 minutes.
- Make sure combs and brushes are free from lice by soaking them in very hot water (about 60°C) for 10 minutes.
- A proven effective treatment is to use any ordinary brand of thick conditioner on dry, brushed and untangled hair and then comb with a fine-toothed metal lice comb. Repeat every 3 days for up to 3 weeks.
- In any case wash the hair then rinse with a conditioner every 2 to 3 days between the two chemical treatments.
- Although regulations vary from state to state, exclusion from school should *not* be necessary after proper treatment.
- All antilouse preparations are toxic, but they are safe if the special head louse lotions are used according to the directions. Keep all preparations out of the eyes and out of the reach of children.