

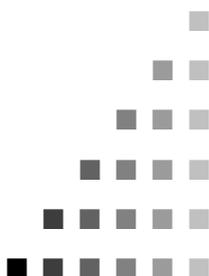
Patient Information Leaflet

Alma Partnership

Telephone: 01202 519311 Fax: 01202 548532

E-mail: admin.alma@dorset.nhs.uk

www.almapartnership.co.uk for practice news and information



Head Lice

For further information visit

www.nhs.uk or www.patient.co.uk

Head Lice

Head lice are tiny wingless insects that live in human hair. They are common, particularly in children. Head lice are grey-brown in colour, the size of a pinhead when hatched and of a sesame seed when fully grown. They cannot fly, jump or swim and are spread by head-to-head contact, climbing from the hair of an infected person to the hair of someone else. Head lice can affect all types of hair irrespective of its condition and length.

A female head louse lays eggs by cementing them to hairs (often close to the root) where they are kept warm by the scalp. The eggs are pinhead size and difficult to see. After 7-10 days, the baby lice hatch and the empty eggshells, known as nits, remain glued in place. Head lice feed by biting the scalp and feeding on blood. They take 6-10 days to become fully grown. Once mature, a head louse can crawl from head to head. A female head louse may start to lay eggs as early as seven days after she has hatched. So to break the cycle and stop them spreading, they need to be removed within seven days of hatching.

In most cases, itching is the main symptom. It's not always easy to see head lice so detection combing is the best way of finding them. This involves using a special fine-toothed head lice comb (with tooth spacing of less than 0.3mm to trap the smallest lice) to comb through the hair.

Head lice can be difficult to treat due to a high re-infestation rate and their ability to develop resistance to traditional insecticides contained in some medications.

Head lice can be effectively treated at home by wet combing the hair using a head lice comb.

The wet combing method involves removing the head lice by systematically combing the hair using a special fine-toothed comb. Combs are available from pharmacies or you can order them online from [Community Hygiene Concern](#).

The use of medicated products is not necessary for wet combing. This is fortunate because head lice have become resistant to the insecticides commonly used to remove them.

Wet combing involves regular and thorough combing. Wash the hair using ordinary shampoo and apply plenty of conditioner, before using a wide-toothed comb to straighten and untangle the hair. Once the comb moves freely through the hair, switch to the louse detection comb. Make sure the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots with the bevel-edge of the teeth lightly touching the scalp. Draw the comb down to the ends of the hair with every stroke and check the comb for lice. Remove lice by wiping or rinsing the comb. Work methodically through the hair, section by section, so that the whole head of hair is combed through. Rinse out conditioner and repeat the combing procedure in the wet hair. Repeat the procedure every 4 days so that you clear young lice as they hatch, before they have time to reach maturity.

Using medicated lotion or spray is an alternative but more expensive and often less successful method of treating head lice. Your pharmacist will be able to recommend an over-the-counter lotion or spray.

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