

What a good opportunity to get ahead on Head Lice

Why not take this time whilst schools are closed and children at home to clear those troublesome head lice?

Let me tell you why children are good hosts. The highest infestation of head lice is amongst children under age 11 because children of that age are more likely to huddle together, share hats and scarves and then hang these items together on clothes pegs at school or nursery. They can take them home and share them with other family members.

The first time you may become aware of an infestation is when the affected person keeps scratching their head.

Please note that the louse prefers a clean head of hair to a dirty one, so do not feel embarrassed when you discover head lice and when purchasing anti-lice preparations.

Despite popular opinion, head lice cannot jump or fly but they can run quite quickly, moving from one head to another if heads are in close contact. They tend to run down the hair shafts to scalp level and then across the scalp to the area behind the ears and in the nape, as these are the warmest areas. There they reproduce, attaching their eggs with a secretion of strong glue, to the hair nearest the scalp, and feed from their hosts. The eggs are very difficult to remove. When the egg has not hatched its colour is either yellow or brown. If you notice lice at the front of the head, this indicates a progressive infestation.

The adult lice can live up to 30 days on the head, laying 7-10 eggs each day. To survive the louse will need to feed on blood several times each day, piercing the scalp to access this. The louse needs this source of food and will so die within 1 to 2 days if not on a host.

Once the eggs are laid, they take up two weeks to hatch. The young louse's main aim is to draw off blood and start to reproduce. Therefore, if hair has been cleared and only one egg is left to hatch the infestation starts over again.

The way to treat this type of infestation is to purchase a proprietary head lice preparation from a pharmacist, who can advise which scalp preparation is best to use in your locality, as lice in one area may become immune to an overused preparation and become known as 'super louse' and more difficult to clear. Always follow the manufacturers' instructions, as with some preparations it is advised to repeat the process a week later.

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After applying the preparation, which in most cases is shampooed onto the head, I find it helpful to apply a light spray of leave-in conditioner, which aids the smooth movement of the nit comb.

If the hair is long, pin the hair into sections, working through each section from the back, and working from the ends of the hair towards the scalp, using the comb. Each time you draw the nit comb through the hair, then wipe the comb on paper towelling, disposing of the contaminated towelling. Note that the nit comb removes the lice but not the eggs so that any unhatched eggs will not be removed in the first session. You should repeat the process with the nit comb each time the hair is shampooed with your usual shampoo and conditioner for a number of weeks.

If the hair is short, then it may not be possible to section. Gently draw the comb through the hair from the nape and back to the front and then down each side. Again, wipe the comb after each draw through.

If head lice is discovered within your family, you are advised to wash all towels and bedding as the infestation can be transmitted and avoid using combs and brushes that others have used.

As heat can help kill headlice by dehydration, in summer I advise that bedding is left out in sunlight and, in winter, placed by radiators.

If the infestation is not brought under control, then constant scratching of the scalp may cause a secondary infection.

A final point: head lice have evolved to live only on human heads (with hair!) and cannot be passed on from animals nor can they be passed onto them, so don't blame our four-legged friends!

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