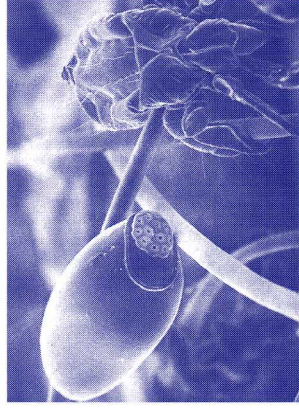


- ★ Head lice are small, six-legged wingless insects, pin-head size when they hatch, less than match-head size when fully grown and grey/brown in colour. They are difficult to detect in dry hair even when the head is closely inspected. They very often cause itching, but this is not always the case, particularly when recently arrived on the head.
- ★ Head lice cannot fly, jump or swim, but spread by clambering from head to head. Anyone with hair can catch them, but children who have head to head contact, either at school or during play, are most commonly affected.
- ★ Head lice feed by biting and sucking blood through the scalp of their host. The female louse lays eggs in sacs (nits) which are very small, dull in colour, and well camouflaged. These are securely glued to hairs where the warmth of the scalp will hatch them out in 7-10 days. Empty egg sacs are white and shiny and may be found further along the hair shaft as the hair grows out. Lice take 6-14 days to become fully grown, after which they are capable of reproduction.
- ★ Head lice are not fussy about hair length or condition. Clean hair is therefore no protection, although regular (eg weekly) hair washing and combing sessions offer a good opportunity to detect head lice, and arrange treatment if discovered.

Lice hang on tight to the hair, usually close to the scalp where there is warmth, food and shelter from detection. Full grown lice take the opportunity to move from head to head during close contact. Younger lice tend to remain for about 6 days on the head where they have hatched.

Head lice need to maintain contact with a host in order to survive. Those lice that leave the host voluntarily, or fall off, are likely to be damaged or approaching death (their life span is about 3 weeks) and so unable to start a new colony. There is no need to wash or fumigate clothing or bedding that comes into contact with head lice.



Magnified photo of the human head louse and louse egg (nit).

If you are at all worried about head lice or feel you need more advice on how to cope, then you should consult your school nurse, health visitor, pharmacist or family doctor.

Further copies of this leaflet may be obtained from:  
[www.orderline.dh.gov.uk](http://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk) and quote 279829

The prevention and treatment of Head Lice  
 Tel:0300 123 1002

Mimicom 0300 123 1003 (8am to 6pm Monday to Friday)

This document is also available in other languages on request.  
 Picture reproduced courtesy of the Electron Microscopy and Histopathology Service at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

# Head Lice

