

Headlice Guidance

Occasionally pupils may suffer from headlice. The following guidance will be of help. Please inform school if your child does get headlice so that we can be aware of the problem. We can also contact the school nurse for additional advice and support if you would like us to.

The Lice

- Headlice are small insects with six legs. They are often said to be "as large as a match head". In fact they are often not much bigger than a pin head, and rarely bigger than a sesame seed (the seeds on burger buns).
- They live on, or very close to the scalp, and dont wander far down the hair shafts for very long.
- The louses mouth is like a very small needle. It sticks this into the scalp and drinks the blood.
- They can only live on human beings. You cant catch them from animals.
- Nits are not the same thing as lice. Lice are the insects that move around the head. Nits are egg cases laid by lice, which stick onto hair shafts. They are smaller than a pin head and are pearly white.
- If you have nits it doesnt always mean that you will have head lice. When you have got rid of all the lice, the nits will stay stuck to the hair until it grows out.
- You only have head lice if you can find a living, moving louse (not a nit) on the scalp.

Who and Where?

- Anybody can get headlice, but they are much rarer in adults.
- Head louse infection is a problem of the whole community, not just the schools.
- Infection is common during school holidays as well as during term time. Parents start to worry more about lice when children go back to school because they think the lice are being caught there.
- A lot of head louse infections are caught from close family and friends in the home and community, not from the school.
- Its not just children who have headlice. Adults get them too.

- Its often said that headlice prefer clean, short hair. In fact, they probably dont much care whether hair is dirty or clean, short or long. Short hair may make it easier for them to get from one head to another.

How you get them

- Headlice can walk from one head to another when the heads are touching for some time.
- You are very unlikely to pick up headlice from brief contact with other people. The longer you have head-to-head contact with someone who has lice, the more likely it is you will get them too.
- They cant swim, fly, hop or jump. The idea that they can jump may have come from the fact that, when dry hair is combed, a head louse caught on the teeth of the comb is sometimes flicked off by static electricity (this is the reason why detection combing should be done with the hair damp).
- You dont get them from objects such as chair backs. Although its just possible that a louse might get from one head to another if a hat is shared, this is very unlikely. Its not the way infection is usually caught.

What happens next

- If you catch one or two lice, they may breed and increase slowly in number. At this stage, most people dont have any symptoms and wont know they have lice unless they look very carefully for them.
- For the first two or three months, there is usually no itch, but then the scalp may start to itch badly. This is due to an allergy, not due to the louse bites themselves.
- Most people only realise that they have headlice when the itch starts. By then they have had lice on their head for two or three months without knowing it.
- In most infections, there arent any more than a dozen or so lice on the scalp at any one time.
- Some people never get the itch, including adults. They may have a few lice on their heads for years without knowing it, and can pass them to other people.

Notes for Families - how to treat headlice

- Don't treat unless you are sure you have found a living, moving louse.
- Never use head louse lotions on your family "just in case." It's never a good idea to use chemicals if they aren't really needed.

If you are sure you have found a living louse:

- Check the heads of all the people in your home.
- Only treat those who have living, moving lice.
- Treat them all at the same time with a headlice lotion (not shampoo).
- Ask your local chemist, school nurse, health visitor or family doctor which lotion to use, and how long to leave it on.
- Put the lotion on to dry hair.
- Use the lotion in a well-ventilated room or in the open air.
- Part the hair near the top of the head, put a few drops on to the scalp and rub it in. Part the hair a bit further down the scalp and do the same again. Do this over and over again until the whole scalp is wet.
- With long hair you don't need to put lotion down any further than where you would put a pony-tail band.
- Use enough lotion - at least one small bottle for each head, and more if the hair is thick. Use all the lotion up.
- Keep the lotion out of the eyes and off the face. One way is to hold a cloth over the face.
- Let the lotion dry on the hair. Some lotions can catch fire, so keep well away from flames, cigarettes, stoves and other sources of heat. Don't use a hair dryer.
- In all of those treated use the same lotion again seven days later in the same way.
- Check all the heads a day or two after the second treatment. If you still find living, moving lice, ask your local chemist, health visitor, school nurse or family doctor for advice.