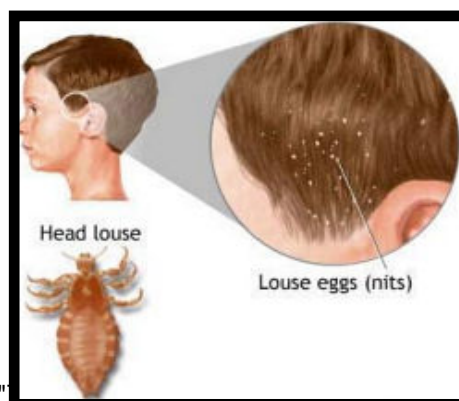


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# Head lice Or Head Nits Symptoms And Treatment

## What Is Head Lice And What Causes Head Lice Infestation?



[caption id="" align="alignright" width="212" caption="Head Lice" /caption]

Head lice are tiny insects - no bigger than the head of a pin - that live on human hair, and feed by sucking blood from the scalp. Their egg cases are called 'nits' and these are always hatched or empty egg shells so their presence does not necessarily indicate active infestation. Once hatched, these shells are harmless. Head lice most commonly affect children, but adults in infected families can also get them. Lice cannot survive out of the hair, and cannot be transferred to animals or pets. They are spread only by relatively prolonged head to head contact, not by brief or fleeting contact, and they walk - not jump - from one person to another.

Any lice which are seen on someone's clothes or back are incapable of transferring to another person and it is impossible to pick them up from towels, bedding or clothing. It is a fallacy that lice only live in dirty hair - they are found just as frequently in scrupulously clean households. They are seen most frequently in children between the ages of 4 and 11, with girls showing a slightly greater infection rate, possibly due to the length of their hair.

### What Are The Signs And Symptoms Of Head Lice?

The main symptom is one of scalp itching, and this can be intense with considerable associated scratching. It can take several weeks for this itching to develop. This scratching can break the scalp skin, and so there may be an associated secondary skin infection which is often painful and may bleed.

### Will I Have Any Tests Or Investigations For Head Lice?

Not as such, but it is always best to confirm the presence of active lice by using a special lice detector comb. This is the most effective way to spot them. The hair should be dampened and then combed carefully from the roots to the tips onto a clean sheet of paper. If lice are present they will be seen on the paper or the comb.

### What Is The Treatment For Head Lice?

The treatment consists of insecticide lotions or shampoos applied regularly to kill both any live lice and eggs. The current practice in the UK is to use one insecticide for a course of treatment (two applications spaced one week apart) and if this treatment fails, to use another product whose active ingredient is in a different insecticide class. The current insecticides in use in the UK are malathion, the pyrethroids permethrin and phenothrin (all available over the counter from chemists without prescription) and carbaryl (prescription only).

In general, carbaryl is kept in reserve if all else fails. Another method of treating head lice is sometimes followed in the UK called 'bug busting'. Here, the hair is wet combed intensely, using a special fine toothed comb and conditioner for at least 30 minutes every third day for a week. It remains unclear as to whether this method is any more or less effective than insecticide treatments and is time consuming for parents and children.

### What Course Will Infestation With Head Lice Follow?

If treated effectively and correctly, head lice can be readily cleared. If they are left however, they will not disappear

by themselves so treatment is the only option.

### **Can I Do Anything To Help Myself?**

It can be impossible to prevent schoolchildren from catching head lice but prompt treatment and regular checking using a lice detector comb will mean their inconvenience is kept to a minimum.

### **Tell Your Doctor**

1. Have you seen any lice or nits on your child or yourself?
2. Have you used a nit detector comb?
3. Do any of your child's friends have head lice?
4. Has your child been scratching their head?
5. Have you used any treatments yourself?

### **Ask Your Doctor**

1. Will ordinary shampoo remove lice?
2. Is there resistance to any of the treatments?
3. Are there any side effects?
4. Do I need to tell anyone about getting lice?
5. Does my whole family need treatment?

By Dr Roger Henderson, MB BS Lond., LMSSA Lond. [Medical advice](#) on head lice is published by [Dr Vivienne Balonwu](#).

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