

All about head lice (from the BUPA web site)



Head lice (also known as *Pediculus capitis*) are small, wingless insects with six legs. They are tan to greyish-white in colour and have hook-like claws that hold onto your hair. Adult head lice are around 1mm to 3mm in length – about the size of a sesame seed.

Female head lice lay eggs, known as nits, which attach to your hair shaft. The nits take about a week to hatch. Young lice are called nymphs – they take about seven days to mature to adults and feed on blood from your scalp to survive. Adult lice can live for up to 30 days. Head lice infestation varies from a few lice to thousands, but a typical infestation is around 30 lice per head.

Head lice can be found anywhere on your scalp. They are most commonly found behind your ears and at the back of your neck. They can only live on human hair – you can't catch head lice from animals. If you have nits, it doesn't always mean that you have head lice. After hatching, the nits can stay stuck to your hair shaft. You only have head lice if you find a living, moving louse on your scalp.

Symptoms of head lice

You usually don't realise you have head lice until your scalp becomes itchy – this can take from one week to three months after initial infestation. You might get a tickling or itching feeling, or the feeling of something moving in your hair. You might develop a rash behind your ears and at the back of your neck – this is caused by a reaction to the louse faeces. If you scratch a lot, you may also develop skin sores, which can become infected. You might also see nits stuck to your hairs shafts as they grow out.

Having these symptoms doesn't always mean you have head lice. For example, an itchy scalp can be caused by other conditions, such as eczema or dandruff. Some people develop itching just by hearing that there are head lice within the school or community. It's important that you don't start any treatment until you have been diagnosed with head lice, or you find a living, moving louse on your scalp.

Causes of head lice

Anyone can get head lice, but they are most common in children aged between four and 11 – the peak age for infestation is between seven and eight.

Other risk factors for head lice infestation include:

being female

living in a household with four or more children

having long hair

being younger than 12

Studies have shown that black African American people are less likely to get head lice.

You can only get head lice through direct head-to-head contact with a person that has them. Head lice can't jump, hop or swim. There is no evidence that head lice have a preference for either clean or dirty hair. It's extremely rare to get head lice by sharing hats, combs or pillows – a louse's lifespan is very short once it's removed from your head.

Diagnosis of head lice

You only have head lice if you can find a living louse on your scalp. They can be hard to spot, but you can comb your wet or dry hair using a special, fine-toothed comb to remove the lice and confirm that you have them. This is called detection combing and it's normally easier to do when your hair is wet. Applying conditioner to your hair can be helpful because the lice can't move as quickly and so are easier to see on the comb. After each stroke, check the comb for lice. It takes around 15 minutes to wet comb your head.



If you do detection combing on dry hair, you can place your thumb on a louse if you find one before pulling the comb through and out of your hair – this will stop the louse being flicked off the comb. If you find any lice when combing, you can attach them to a piece of sticky tape to take to your GP or a health professional (such as a school nurse or a pharmacist) if you're unsure what you're looking for. Check all members of your household with detection combing so you know who will need treatment.