

# Headlice: Prevention and treatment

## Chemical treatment precautions

Keep treatment preparations away from eyes, nose and mouth. Seek medical advice before use on pregnant or breast-feeding women, infants under two years old or people with sensitive skin.

The wet combing technique can be used as an alternative treatment.

## Chemical treatment hints

Do not use hair dryers after applying a treatment preparation. The heat can destroy the active ingredient.

Avoid using hair conditioners (including 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioners, and the wet combing technique) for a day before and after applying chemical treatment preparations. Conditioner can reduce the effectiveness of the treatment.

## Removing nits

It is not necessary to remove all nits if they are dead (more than 1-2 cm from the scalp). However, a school community may prefer that nits are removed.

Nits stick very firmly to the hair and can be difficult to remove. Wetting hair with vinegar may help to loosen the nits, which can then be combed out with a headlice comb or picked out by hand.

## Treatment failure

The most common reasons for treatment failure are:

- > not following the manufacturer's instructions.
- > the resistance of headlice to the chemical used.
- > not repeating the treatment in 7-10 days (to kill headlice that have hatched from eggs that weren't killed in the first treatment).
- > getting headlice from an untreated person.

## If the treatment has not got rid of the headlice

- > if chemical treatment was used, check the instructions and repeat the treatment if they have not been correctly followed (especially the need to repeat in 7-10 days).
- > check the heads of all household members using the 'wet combing' technique (overleaf) and treat all who have headlice (even if they don't feel itchy).
- > try an alternative treatment (check with your chemist to make sure you are choosing a treatment preparation with a different active chemical, as different brands may contain the same chemicals).
- > try the wet combing treatment method.

## Preventing the spread

- > avoid direct head-to-head contact.
- > avoid sharing brushes, combs, ribbons, hats, helmets.
- > consider cleaning brushes, combs, towels, pillow cases with hot water and detergent (60°C for 30 seconds).
- > discourage children from playing with each others' hair.
- > keep long hair firmly plaited, or at least tied back – slick down stray hairs with hairspray or gel.
- > brush hair and check for headlice regularly.
- > shaving the head is not necessary.

## Further information

If you are concerned about headlice or want more information contact:

- > your community health centre
- > chemists and GPs
- > the Child and Youth Health Parent Helpline: 1300 364 100 or online at [www.cyh.com/Default.aspx?p=1](http://www.cyh.com/Default.aspx?p=1)
- > your local council Environmental Health Officer
- > SA Health on 8226-7100 or go to our website [www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/enviro-health-index.htm](http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/enviro-health-index.htm)

## For more information

**Health Protection Programs  
Public Health  
SA Health**  
**Telephone: 08 8226 7100**  
**Facsimile: 08 8226 7102**  
**Email: [public.health@health.sa.gov.au](mailto:public.health@health.sa.gov.au)**  
**[www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/enviro-health-index.htm](http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/enviro-health-index.htm)**

If you require this information in an alternative language or format please contact SA Health on the details provided above and they will make every effort to assist you.



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## Headlice

Headlice are social pests and rarely pose a threat to health. Outbreaks can be controlled if parents regularly check their children's hair for headlice and follow the recommended treatment methods if they find active lice.

### Headlice facts

- > Headlice only live on human heads.
- > Headlice can live in clean or dirty hair.
- > Headlice are transferred mainly by direct head-to-head contact; rarely by brushes, combs, ribbons, hats etc.
- > Headlice do not carry disease, but bacterial infections can occur from scratching the scalp.
- > Headlice treatments often don't kill 100% of the nits (eggs).
- > Successful treatment does not protect the person from getting more headlice later.

### Headlice

- > are small insects (2-4 mm long and about 1 mm wide) with a flat body and six clawed legs, and are pale to dark brown in colour.
- > feed on blood, piercing the scalp several times a day.
- > crawl and do not fly, jump or hop.
- > nymphs (young headlice) take about a week to reach maturity, and live for another 2-3 weeks – each mature female can lay up to eight eggs a day (that's over 150 eggs during a life cycle).

### Nits (eggs)

- > are tiny, hard, yellow to white in colour and are attached firmly to the hair shaft close to the scalp.
- > hatch as nymphs after 7-10 days.
- > are probably hatched or dead if more than 1-2 cm from the scalp.
- > may have a 'sandy' or 'gritty' feel when running fingers through the hair.
- > are easier to see than headlice but can be confused with dandruff which is flaky and easy to remove.

### Responsibility

It is the responsibility of the parent/guardian to check their child's hair for headlice and to treat for headlice if they are present. It is not the responsibility of school or child care centre staff to check or treat students for headlice.

Parents/guardians may be notified if a staff member believes a child has headlice. The child and other household members should be checked, and if necessary, treatment should begin before the child returns to school.

A school may request a note from the doctor stating that the child has been effectively treated before the child returns to school.

### Checking for headlice and nits

Check everyone in the household every week. During headlice outbreaks check each day.

The wet combing technique (overleaf) has been shown to be more reliable than just checking dry hair.

Symptoms may include excessive itching of the scalp especially at the front, nape of the neck, behind the ears, under the fringe, and at the base of plaits and ponytails.

**Note:** *Not all people with headlice will itch.*

### Treatment

The two most common headlice treatment methods are 'wet combing' and 'chemical' treatment:

- > 'wet combing' involves wetting the hair and scalp liberally with hair conditioner to stun the headlice, then combing the headlice and nits out.
- > 'chemical' treatment uses 'pediculicides' which kill the headlice.

Other treatments such as electric combs, herbal/essential oils and enzyme treatments may also remove headlice, but follow the manufacturer's instructions for best results.

People who suffer from epilepsy, heart disease or have heart pacemakers or other neurostimulator devices should avoid using or handling electric combs.

If there is any adverse reaction to a treatment, seek medical advice.

### Wet combing treatment

Wet combing can be used to both check for and treat headlice. You will need hair conditioner (a cheap product is fine, and white conditioner makes headlice easier to see), and a special headlice comb from a chemist. Fine metal combs are recommended. Work under a bright light or sunlight.



### Eight step technique

1. Generously apply conditioner to dry hair to completely cover the scalp and the full length of the hair.
2. Untangle the hair with a wide-toothed comb.
3. Put the headlice comb flat against the scalp and draw the comb through each section of hair from the root of the hair to the ends.
4. Wipe the comb after each stroke onto white tissue or kitchen paper, checking each time for headlice and nits.
5. Repeat for every part of the head at least five times.
6. Dispose of tissues in a bin.
7. Wash the hair with warm water and shampoo; rinse thoroughly.
8. Scrub the comb with an old toothbrush in hot soapy water.

If you find live headlice, repeat steps 1-8, two to three times a week for three weeks.

When no more headlice or nits can be found, follow steps 1-8 once a week to keep everyone headlice-free.

### Chemical treatment

- > Treatment preparations contain chemicals which can kill headlice and nits (eggs), although not all are effective against nits.
- > Always follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- > It is possible to catch headlice very soon after treatment.
- > Only treat those people who have active headlice but continue to check everyone each day for 7-10 days.
- > Headlice treatment preparations are available from pharmacies without a prescription – they may also be available through schools.
- > Always re-treat 7-10 days after the first treatment to kill any headlice that may have hatched from nits that survived the first treatment.