



## Leaflet: Head lice - detection

# Checking for Head lice

- ◆ *Head lice* are tiny grey/brown insects. Infection with head lice is common in children but can affect anyone at any age. Head lice are about the size of a sesame seed (the seeds on burger buns). They cling to hairs but stay close to the scalp which they feed off. They lay eggs that hatch into new lice after 7-10 days.
- ◆ *Nits* are the white empty egg shells that are left when the lice hatch. Nits can look like dandruff but stick strongly to hair. Unlike dandruff, nits cannot be brushed out easily.

## How can you tell if you have head lice?

An itchy scalp occurs in about 1 in 3 affected people. Many infected people have no symptoms but can still pass lice on to others. Lice can just about be seen with the naked eye. However, they are difficult to find just by looking in the hair. 'Detection combing' is the best way of finding head lice if they are suspected. Some people advise to do this on children's hair regularly, about once a week.

- ◆ Wash the hair in the normal way with ordinary shampoo and partly dry with a towel.
- ◆ Comb with a normal comb first to get rid of tangles.
- ◆ Then use a detector comb with the hair damp, not dripping. This is a special fine toothed comb that is available at pharmacies. (The teeth of normal combs are too far apart.)
- ◆ Start with the comb touching the scalp next to the roots of the hair. Comb downward to the ends of the hair. Repeat this working around each part of the head combing each area carefully from the scalp downwards.
- ◆ Lice will be caught in the comb and may be seen. Have a look at the comb teeth for lice after each stroke in a good light. A magnifying glass may help.
- ◆ To increase the chance of seeing any lice, wipe the comb with a white cloth or tissue after each stroke. The dark lice will show up as dark bits on the white cloth.
- ◆ Comb over a white surface such as white paper. This is so that any head lice that are combed out without getting stuck on the teeth of the comb are easy to see.
- ◆ It takes about 10-15 minutes to do detection combing properly.
- ◆ If you find dark bits and are unsure if they are lice, stick one to a piece of white paper with clear sticky tape. Show this to a doctor, school nurse or practice nurse.

## What should I do if I find a head louse?

- ◆ Tell people who have had 'head to head' contact within the last 4-6 weeks to check for head lice. This is usually family members and 'best friends' of affected children. All affected people should be treated at the same time. This stops lice being passed around again.
- ◆ See a pharmacist, practice nurse or GP for advice on treatment. You can buy lotions that kill head lice from pharmacies. They are also available on prescription. Lotions are usually effective at curing lice infections. A 'wet combing treatment' is an alternative. This is time consuming but has become popular. However, it is not clear how effective this treatment is compared to chemical lotion treatment.

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