

Head lice and nits

Mention head lice and most of us instantly develop an itch. You'll find these little critters at every school across Australia – and probably the world – at some point during the year. While head lice and nits, (the eggs of head lice) are certainly annoying and persistent, they're not dangerous. Here's everything you need to know to rid your kids of head lice and nits.

At a glance

- Head lice and nits only live on human heads.
- They don't care if the hair is long or short, clean or dirty.
- Head lice are an unavoidable fact of life for all school-aged kids.
- The best and cheapest way to remove them is with inexpensive conditioner and a nit comb.
- You will need to re-treat your child several times before all the eggs will be gone.

Nitbusters' myth busters

- Kids with head lice don't always scratch. The only way to rule out infestation is to look carefully through your child's hair.
- Head lice are only found on the human head.
- Head lice and nits live in long, short, curly, straight, clean or dirty hair.
- They are not found on family pets.
- Shaving your child's head is radical and unnecessary!
- Head lice do not live on furniture, hats, bedding, carpet or anywhere else in the environment.
- Head lice don't leap or jump. They crawl from hair to hair, from one head to another.
- Treating anything other than the human head does not get rid of head lice.
- There is no way to prevent your child from getting head lice.

- You may be able to help reduce transmission by tying long hair back and braiding it.
- Never use insecticides, methylated spirits or kerosene on your child's head.
- Some essential oils, including tea tree oil, can trigger a reaction in some people. Tea tree oil is a proven antiseptic, but its effectiveness as a head lice treatment has not been demonstrated.
- You don't need to use an expensive commercial product.
- If you do decide to use a commercial treatment on your child's head, read the instructions very carefully.

Removing head lice and nits

You'll need:

- a bottle of cheap hair conditioner
- a towel
- a thick tooth comb
- a fine tooth comb
- a roll of paper towels.

Steps:

1. Sit your child on a chair or stool in front of you. Wrap a towel around their shoulders to catch conditioner spill. (You may want to put a video or TV show on, as this process can take a while.)
2. Apply a cheap, pale coloured conditioner generously to your child's hair. Work it through to coat every strand of hair. For long hair, it may be easier to tie one side of the hair off, and work in sections.
3. Head lice breathe through small openings along their abdomens. By coating the hair and therefore the louse in something thick and slimy, these openings close over, shutting down the louse's breathing for about 20 minutes – long enough for them to stay still and be combed out.
4. After you've applied the conditioner, use a large comb to part small sections of the hair, starting from the nape and working upwards toward the crown.

5. When the hair is detangled and manageable, use a fine lice comb and run through each section several times. Eggs are often found behind the ears and toward the back of the head. By combing from the bottom of the back of the head up, towards the top and front of the head, you're more likely to find the head lice.
6. After each comb out, wipe the conditioner on the paper towel. If your child has head lice, you will see them on the towel (they're a little like small, brown, chia or sesame seeds.)
7. Keep combing each section of hair until no further lice or eggs appear on the paper towel. Often you will see lots of old egg casings that may take a while to remove.
8. Once you have combed and re-combed each section of hair, either re-plait or tie it back if it's long enough.
9. Head lice often congregate on the crown of the head, so it's not until you reach these last sections of hair that you'll find adult lice. However, heads that are severely infected will have adult lice everywhere.
10. Repeat at least twice over the next few days, until you can't find any more in the conditioner. You'll never be able to get all the head lice and eggs out the first time. However, in the days after your first treatment, the eggs will hatch and you'll be able to catch the crawling nymphs (young lice).