

Head lice

What are head lice?

Head lice are small, flat insects that live and lay eggs on the human scalp. They are sometimes called nits, kutis, kutu bugs, utu or riha. They live on the hair and feed by sucking blood from the scalp. They are pale grey (before feeding) and reddish brown (after feeding). They can look like grains of sand or dandruff. Head lice do not carry or pass on disease.

Who can get head lice?

Anyone can get head lice. They are a common problem and cause concern and frustration for parents and children. Catching head lice has nothing to do with poor hygiene.

How do people get head lice?

People get head lice from head to head contact with someone who already has head lice. This can easily happen when children play or sleep together and their heads touch. Head lice can only crawl from hair to hair. They can't fly or jump from head to head. Head lice only survive on humans. They die quickly when they are not on the head, usually within 24 hours.

How do I check for and treat head lice?

Head lice can live all over the head but particularly like warm places behind the ears, around the bottom of the hair line, and on top of the head. Treatment of head lice is usually by physical methods (wet combing) or chemical/herbal treatments. You don't need to buy expensive products to get rid of head lice. You can buy a fine-tooth head lice comb from your pharmacy. See instructions on the following page. If you choose to use a chemical or herbal treatment, speak to your pharmacist, doctor or nurse for advice about what treatment to use and how to use it. Never use fly spray, kerosene or treatments intended for animals – these may harm children and adults.

If you find live head lice or eggs on your child's scalp, use the wet comb method to get rid of as many nits as soon as you can. Remember to check everyone in the house for nits as well. Use the wet comb method every day on everyone who has nits. You can stop once you find no lice or eggs for 3 days in a row. Check the hair of everyone in the house twice a week for the next 2 weeks to make sure everyone stays clear.

Check for lice and eggs whenever you are brushing your child's hair or any time they are scratching their head.