



Head Lice and Nits

Head lice and nits are very common. They are unpleasant, but not a serious health risk. Children found with head lice are usually excluded from child care until treatment has commenced. It is important that you talk with your child's carer if you find head lice.

What are head lice and nits?

Head lice are very small, wingless insects, about the size of a sesame seed. They move fast and can be difficult to find. They live on the scalp of human heads where they feed by sucking human blood. They cannot fly or jump so the only means of catching head lice is by direct contact.

Nits are the eggs laid by the head lice. Nits stick to individual hairs, close to the scalp. They remain attached to the hair even after the eggs have hatched. The presence of nits does not necessarily mean that there is an infestation of head lice.

Facts about head lice:

- Head lice are **not** related to hygiene – they live on all types of hair and all sorts of people
- Head lice are **not** a health hazard – they do not carry or transfer diseases or infections
- **Any** child who comes into contact with someone who has head lice can become infested with head lice or nits.
- Head lice cannot live on cats, dogs, other pets or carpets or bed linen
- They can only survive for a short time away from the human scalp, so catching them from hats or other clothing is very unlikely.

How to detect head lice and nits

Itching and scratching is an indicator but not a sure sign of head lice. Some people who have head lice have no itchiness and not all itchiness is caused by head lice. The best places to look for head lice and nits are close to the scalp, behind the ears and at the back of the neck. The best way of finding (and removing) head lice is by putting hair conditioner on to hair, combing through with a fine-toothed head lice comb, then wiping this on paper towel.

How to treat head lice

If head lice are found, using the procedure described above is an effective way of removing head lice and nits. This should be repeated weekly until no head lice are found. It is not necessary to see a doctor. Safe chemical head lice treatments are available from chemists and can be used if the following guidelines are followed:

- Use only specifically labelled head lice treatments and follow directions
- Australian products must comply with certain safety standards, and should display information that confirms this – ask a chemist if you are in doubt
- Extra care should be taken before treating young children under the age of 12 months, or with children who have allergies or asthma
- Never use other insecticides or pesticides as these can be harmful.

Note: Kerosene was used in the past, but is ineffective and unsafe – don't use it.

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