

Head lice and nits are very common in young children. They don't have anything to do with dirty hair and are usually picked up from head-to-head contact.

Check if it's head lice



Head lice are small insects, up to 3mm long. They can be difficult to spot



Close-up view of a head louse



Head lice eggs (nits) are yellow, brown or white (empty shells) and attached to the hair

Head lice sometimes can make your head feel itchy or as if something is moving in your hair. The only way to be sure someone has head lice is by finding live lice or eggs. You can do this by combing their hair with a special fine-toothed comb (detection comb). You can buy these online or at pharmacies.

How to get rid of head lice

You can treat head lice without seeing a GP. Treat head lice as soon as you spot them. You should check everyone in the house and treat them on the same day if they have head lice. There's no need to keep your child off school if they have head lice.

Use lotion or spray to treat head lice

You can use medicated lotions and sprays that kill head lice in all types of hair. You can buy these from pharmacies, supermarkets or online. Head lice should die within a day. Lotions and sprays come with a comb to remove dead lice and eggs. Some treatments need to be repeated after a week to kill any newly hatched lice. Check the pack to see whether they're OK for you or your child to use and how long they should be left in the hair. If lotions or sprays don't work, speak to your pharmacist about other treatments. Some treatments aren't recommended because they're unlikely to work:

- products containing permethrin
- head lice "repellents"
- electric combs for head lice
- tree and plant oil treatments, such as tea tree oil, eucalyptus oil and lavender oil herbal remedies

If you don't want to use chemicals

You can buy a special fine-toothed comb (detection comb) online or from pharmacies to remove head lice and nits. There will be instructions on the pack to follow, but typically you:

- use the comb on wet or dry hair – although it usually works best on wet hair with conditioner
- comb the whole head of hair, from the roots to the ends
- repeat every few days for 2 weeks

You can't prevent head lice

There's nothing you can do to prevent head lice. You can reduce the risk of lice spreading by avoiding head-to-head contact.

Don't use medicated lotions and sprays to prevent head lice. This can irritate the scalp. There's no need for children to stay off school, or to wash laundry on a hot wash.