

## **INFORMATION ON HEADLICE**

**The best way to stop head louse infection is to do detection combing regularly.**

### **Information on Head lice**

Head lice (*Pediculus capitis*) affect only humans, and cannot be passed on to, or caught from, animals. Infestation with head lice is also known as pediculosis.

Head lice are tiny (pin-head sized) grey-brown, wingless insects that live by sucking blood from the scalp. Their eggs, which look like tiny white specks, are known as nits and are laid glued to the base of hairs.

The eggs hatch after seven to 10 days, and 10 to 14 days after hatching the lice are mature and 2-4mm long (the size of a sesame seed). Once mature they start to reproduce, so numbers can grow alarmingly if not treated.

Head lice are common in schoolchildren, particularly between the ages of four and 11, but anyone with hair can catch them.

Head lice are difficult to remove because of their size, reinfestation rate, life cycle and their ability to develop immunity to insecticides. Lice can be a persistent and recurring nuisance, so it is important to treat them quickly and thoroughly.

Once infestation is confirmed it can be treated at home by either using a wet comb with conditioner, or medicated lotions, combined with a special nit comb available from pharmacies.

### **Treatment of Head Lice**

**Wet combing method** - Wet combing, or 'bug-busting' is used to remove lice without using chemical treatments. This method can be helpful because head lice are growing increasingly resistant to the insecticides used to remove them. The best procedure is as follows:

wash the hair as normal using an ordinary shampoo, apply conditioner liberally to wet hair (this causes the lice to lose their grip on the hair), comb the hair through with a normal comb first, with a fine tooth nit comb, comb from the roots along the complete length of the hair and after each stroke check the comb for lice and wipe it clean. Work methodically over the whole head for at least 30 minutes; rinse the hair as normal, repeat every three days for at least two weeks.

**Medicated lotion or rinse** - Ask your pharmacist for an over-the-counter (OTC) insecticide lotion or crème rinse. Only use a lotion if you find a living (moving) head louse. Apply the preparation according to the instructions, and remove the lice and eggs with a fine-toothed nit comb. You should take care when applying treatment because the preparations are usually toxic. The normal advice is to treat once, and repeat seven days later.

Always ask for advice before using medicated lotions on young babies (under six months), pregnant women or people with asthma, or allergies, and always read the instructions carefully.

Sometimes complementary therapy treatments such as tea tree oil are recommended for treating head lice, but their effectiveness has not yet been proven.

There is no need to wash clothing, or bedding, if they have come into contact with head lice. This is because head lice quickly die without a host to provide warmth and food.

### **Prevention**

There is no prevention for head lice infestation other than normal hair care and checking yours and your family's hair and scalp periodically.

If your child has long hair, tie it back as this helps to reduce the likelihood of contact between their hair and that of an infected child.

Do not use medicated lotions or rinses 'just in case', for example in close friends or family members.

They should only be used if live lice are found. Regular combing of hair using the bug-busting method (see treatment section) can help with early detection as well as treatment.