About head lice

Head lice have been around for many thousands of years. Anyone can get head lice and given the chance head lice move from head to head without discrimination.

- Head lice are small, wingless, blood sucking insects.
- Their colour varies from whitish-brown to reddish-brown.
- People get head lice from direct hair to hair contact with another person who has head lice.
- Head lice do not have wings or jumping legs so they cannot fly or jump from head to head. They can only crawl.

Finding head lice

Lice can crawl and hide. The easiest and most effective way to find them is to follow these steps:

**Step 1**
Comb any type of hair conditioner on to dry, brushed (detangled) hair. This stuns the lice and makes it difficult for them to grip the hair or crawl around.

**Step 2**
Now comb sections of the hair with a fine tooth, head lice comb.

**Step 3**
Wipe the conditioner from the comb onto a paper towel or tissue.

**Step 4**
Look on the tissue and on the comb for lice and eggs.

**Step 5**
Repeat the combing for every part of the head at least 4 or 5 times
If lice or eggs are found, the child’s hair should be treated.

Head lice eggs are small (the size of a pinhead) and oval. A live egg will ‘pop’ when squashed between fingernails. Eggs will not move on a hair shaft – dandruff will.

Treating head lice

- Concentrate on the head - there is no evidence to suggest that you need to clean the house or classroom. Lice will dehydrate when not on the head.
- **No treatment kills all of the eggs** so treatment must involve two applications seven days apart.
- If you are using lotions, apply the product to dry hair.
- There is no need to treat the whole family, unless they also have head lice.
- Only the pillowcase requires specific laundering; either wash it in hot water (at least 60 degrees centigrade) or dry it using a clothes dryer on the hot or warm setting.
- There is no product available that prevents head lice. Using the conditioner and comb method once a week will help you detect any head lice early and minimise the problem. Tying back long hair can help prevent the spread of head lice.
- Combs with long, rounded stainless steel teeth positioned very close together have been shown to be the most effective, however, any head lice comb can be use.

Further resources

Further information and resources are provided to help you detect, treat and manage headlice – visit www.health.vic.gov.au/headlice/resources.htm.

Pamphlets are also available in hard copy. They are free of charge and can be ordered either on-line or by printing the order form and faxing it to: Communicable Diseases Control, Department of Human Services Facsimile: (61 3) 9096 9174.

Information provided above is contained on the Victorian Government Health Information website – visit www.health.vic.gov.au/headlice/about.htm