



1344 Heading off head lice

[◀Back](#)

Heading off head lice 6th February 2013 No. 1344

It's normally considered that cockroaches and crocodiles are the great survivors from the dim distant past; but it appears even the humble head louse has been around for over 100,000 years. As irritating as head lice are, they are essentially harmless and there are even suggestions that they may be beneficial in stimulating some natural immunity against the much more dangerous body louse.

Head lice feed exclusively on human blood; but unlike body lice and mosquitoes, two other groups of little blood suckers, it appears that head lice do not carry disease. They can, however, cause severe itching and this can lead to scratching and skin infections.

The medical term for head lice is *pediculus humanus capitis*; but however you describe them, these tiny wingless insects are extremely common. In fact, head lice are endemic in Australia. Interestingly, they can't jump or fly but they sure can crawl and climb; and they live their entire life (about a month or so) on the head of their host.

Of course, it's about this time – when school age children are meeting old friends and making some new friends – they will attract some uninited acquaintances as well. Statistics indicate that more than 20% of primary school students are likely to have head lice.

However, the fact is, anyone with a head can catch head lice – regardless of age, sex, background or how clean your hair is. Head lice spread anywhere that people work, play and live together. Indeed, it takes only one infested head to infest a whole classroom full of heads; then our children so unselfishly pass the infestation on to the rest of the family.

Their favourite hiding places are behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Female lice lay their eggs (known as nits) close to the scalp, where they remain firmly stuck to the base of the hair shaft until they hatch a week or so later.

Of course an itchy scalp may be due to many other causes – among them dandruff, psoriasis and so-called seborrhoeic dermatitis. So, before you start shampooing with insecticide, it's best to get an accurate diagnosis. The recently revised Pharmacy Self Care fact card titled *Head Lice* will help confirm the problem and find the solution as well.

The good news is that if you or your children have head lice, there are simple, safe and effective strategies to send them on their way. Various shampoos, lotions, cream rinses and conditioners are available. Many chemical treatments are based on the chrysanthemum-type pyrethrin insecticides; some contain malathion; and there are several remedies available based on essential oils such as anise, lavender, rosemary and the Australian favourite melaleuca (tea tree) oil. When used as indicated these natural treatments have been shown in some studies to be more effective even than the chemical treatments.

There are also special fine tooth combs (some battery operated) to help facilitate the removal of the sticky nits and a good hair conditioner will get rid of the knots.

If live lice are found in the combings after treatment, it's possible that the head lice are resistant to the particular product, and the person should be retreated as soon as possible using a product from a different group. Nevertheless, most treatment failures are due to inadequate time in contact with hair and scalp, inappropriate application methods, or the use of ineffective products. Ask your pharmacist to recommend an evidence-based product – that is: one that is proven to be effective.

For information on where to find a *Head Lice* fact card, phone the Pharmaceutical society on 1300 369 772 or go to the Pharmaceutical Society website at: www.psa.org.au and click on "Self Care" then "Use the Self Care Pharmacy Finder".

[◀Back](#)