

Head Lice “Nits” – Customer Information

Your hairdresser may have noticed that there were signs of head lice infestation at the time of your child’s appointment.

Getting head lice is not a sign of poor hygiene, so don’t be embarrassed if your child gets it. In fact, lice prefer clean hair because it allows them to move from hair to hair more easily. Head lice are more of a nuisance than anything as they do not transmit any diseases although scratching the scalp can lead to sores and infections.

The Council’s Environmental Health Officer has recommended that on finding an infected customer your hairdresser discontinue the appointment and discreetly (to avoid any embarrassment) let you know there is a problem. A separate fact sheet is also available if you want it.

Your hairdresser will thoroughly clean and then sterilise all cutting tools, towels and coverings by immersing in hot water (> 60°C). You can do the same with your home hair cutting equipment (electrical appliances of course must not be immersed in water neither should any materials liable to be damaged by hot water).

Some Treatment Options

If you’re new to the lice game, try a range of products and settle on something that you’re comfortable with. Because live eggs hatch in 7-10 days, the key to success in getting rid of them is to repeat whatever treatment you settle on every three-four days for a couple of weeks. You can only break the cycle if you stop the newly hatched lice from laying eggs. Make sure the whole family is checked and treated if necessary.

Dry combing

This method is for removal of headlice and eggs.

- Use a purpose designed metal fine-toothed comb.
- Fingernails can effectively remove eggs.
- Individual strands of hair can be cut to remove difficult eggs.
- Some combs will extract adult headlice only and leave the eggs; the closer together the teeth of the comb are, the more successful combing will be.

Wet combing

This method, using any kind of hair conditioner, is for detection and removal of headlice and eggs. It is recommended that this treatment be repeated on alternate days for three weeks. The idea is to smother the headlice with conditioner, preventing them moving away, and to allow manual removal. Do not use conditioner within a day of using a chemical treatment; it will make the chemical treatment ineffective.

- Apply enough conditioner (much more than usual) on hair to wet thoroughly cover the whole scalp and all the hair from the roots to the tips.
- Keep the conditioner on the hair about 5 minutes using a shower cap or plastic food-wrap. This will ‘stun’ the insects for about 20 minutes.
- Comb the hair straight and get knots out with an ordinary comb.
- Use a fine-toothed comb to systematically comb the hair. Comb the full length of each hair.
- Wipe the comb with a clean tissue after each stroke of the comb.
- After thorough combing and inspection, wash the conditioner out.

Hair length

Short hair is easier to comb, requires less time to treat and makes detection easier. But please note that it certainly should not be necessary to shave heads.

Chemicals

The use of any chemical in or on the body carries risk. Some older treatments for headlice are no longer available because of the risk they posed. The chemicals used are insecticides and should be used with care and strictly as directed by the manufacturer. Chemicals are expensive.

There are three chemicals that are most commonly used:

Pyrethrins – derived from chrysanthemum flowers, these attack the insects' nervous system but break down in sunlight. These are usually combined with piperonyl butoxide for more effectiveness.

Pyrethroids – synthetic pyrethrins that are more stable in sunlight.

Maldeson – an organophosphate insecticide that attacks the insects' nervous system.

NEVER use flammable solvents such as fly-spray, meths or petrol on hair.

- Apply the treatment strictly in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- Treat those members of the household who appear to be hosting headlice. *Do not* treat babies with chemicals.
- *Do not* wash the hair or use conditioners for at least 24 hours after treating. Treatments are designed to coat the hair shaft and should be allowed to remain.
- *Do not* use hairdryers on treated hair. The heat may break down the active chemical.
- Comb the hair carefully to remove as many dead or live headlice and eggs as possible.
- Repeat the treatment after seven to ten days.
- Check *all* members of the household daily for a period of three weeks.

Herbal remedies

Several herbal preparations are available; however the effectiveness of these is not clearly established. Some may be no more effective than conditioners whilst other may be more toxic than chemical preparations – so choose carefully and seek advice before you buy or try. Simple products such as food oil (eg olive oil) and hair gel may make combing easier.

Tea tree oil will not kill head lice but is effective as a repellent. Some parents have put 5-10 drops in the shampoo. Others have wiped the oil around the brims of hats.

What else can help?

Extra precautions may include washing all bedlinen and certainly pillowcases and towels in hot water (at least 60 degrees centigrade) and tumble drying for 20 minutes on high. Other items that have come in contact with heads should also be thoroughly cleaned.

Soak hairbrushes and combs in hot water (ie above 60°C) for around ten minutes. Vacuuming carpets and rugs may also be helpful, if only to ensure that dead nits and lice are collected and not left to reappear on the heads or clothing of people in the house.