

How to get rid of head lice and nits

Treatments to get rid of head lice are available to buy from pharmacies, supermarkets and online.

The main treatments are:

Lotions and sprays

Wet combing

Everyone with head lice in your household should be treated on the same day.

If a treatment doesn't work the first time, you can try it again, try a different treatment, or get advice from your school nurse, health visitor, pharmacist or GP.

Lotions and sprays

There are several different products that can be applied to the scalp and hair to kill head lice, including:

- dimeticone 4% lotion or lotion spray – applied and left for 8 hours (usually overnight)
- dimeticone 4% spray gel – applied and left for 15 minutes
- mineral oil and dimeticone spray – applied and left for 15 minutes
- isopropyl myristate and cyclomethicone solution – applied and left for 5-10 minutes

Some treatments need to be done twice – seven days apart – to make sure any newly hatched lice are killed.

Detection combing should usually be done two or three days after finishing treatment, and again another seven days after that, to check for any live head lice.

Always check the pack or leaflet to see if a product is suitable for you, particularly if you're pregnant or breastfeeding, or your child has head lice and is less than two years of age.

Your pharmacist can recommend a suitable treatment and advise you how to use it correctly if necessary.

Wet combing

Wet combing involves removing head lice with a special fine-toothed comb. It's suitable for everyone and is relatively inexpensive.

A number of lice removal combs are available to buy. Combs with flat-faced teeth spaced 0.2-0.3mm apart are best for removing head lice, although combs with smaller gaps can be used to remove eggs and nits (egg cases) after treatment.

The comb may come with instructions outlining how to use it. A commonly used method is described below.

- Wash the hair with ordinary shampoo and apply plenty of conditioner.
- Use an ordinary, wide-toothed comb to straighten and untangle the hair.
- Once the comb moves freely through the hair without dragging, switch to the louse detection comb.
- Make sure the teeth of the comb slot into the hair at the roots, with the edge of the teeth lightly touching the scalp.
- Draw the comb down from the roots to the ends of the hair with every stroke, and check the comb for lice each time – remove lice by wiping the comb with tissue paper or rinsing it.
- Work through the hair, section by section, so that the whole head of hair is combed through.
- Do this at least twice to help ensure you haven't missed any areas, until no more lice are found.

Repeat this procedure on days five, nine and 13. Detection combing should be done on day 17, to check for any live head lice.

Treatments not recommended

The following treatments aren't recommended because they're unlikely to be effective:

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

There's also no need to stay off work or school or wash clothing and laundry on a hot wash, as this is unlikely to be useful.

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