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Head lice

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.

Treatment

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.

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.

Glossary

Immunity

The immune system is the body's defence system, which helps protect it from disease, bacteria and viruses.