Head lice

Information for patients and relatives

This leaflet can be made available in other formats including large print, CD and Braille and in languages other than English, upon request.

This leaflet tells you about head lice (nits) and how they can be treated. More detailed advice on treatment can be obtained from your pharmacist (chemist), school nurse or doctor.

What are head lice?

Head lice (Pediculosis capitis) are tiny insects that live on the scalp and feed by sucking blood from the skin. They are the size of sesame seeds (the seeds on burger buns) and are brown / grey in colour. The eggs of the lice are called nits. These are oval and yellowish white in colour. They stick to the hair and look a bit like dandruff but are difficult to remove.

Who can catch head lice?

Anyone with hair can catch head lice but young children and their families are most at risk.

How are head lice passed on?

Head lice cannot jump, fly or swim. They are passed on by direct head to head contact. They can only live for a very short time once they are removed from hair.

How can I tell if I have head lice?

In the early stage most people do not know they have head lice unless the hair is checked. If left untreated head lice multiply and some people develop itching or a rash. The bites can become infected if scratched.

The best way to find head lice is by combing the hair with a fine toothed comb (nit comb). The nit comb must be plastic with flat faced, parallel - sided teeth that are less than 0.3mm apart. These can be bought from pharmacists or supermarkets. You should check everyone's hair at least once a week. To do this you should:

- wash hair as normal
- apply lots of conditioner to the full length of the hair
- comb the full length of the hair using the fine toothed comb, wiping the comb clean after each stroke, checking for lice until all of the hair has been combed
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• if lice are present you will find one or more on the teeth of the comb. If you are not sure whether they are lice stick them on a piece of paper with clear sticky tape and ask your school nurse or family doctor for advice

• rinse hair as normal.

How can head lice be treated?

Treatment is only needed if a living, moving louse is found.

Chemical treatments are available from your pharmacist or you can ask your GP who can prescribe them for you. **You must** repeat the treatment after 7 days to make sure that any lice which hatch after the first treatment are also killed.

Chemical treatments are either water or alcohol based. **Alcohol based lotions** are flammable and **must not** be used near cigarettes, fires or flames and are not suitable for people with asthma, eczema, broken skin or children under 5.

Shampoos do not work because the chemical does not stay on the hair long enough.

Your pharmacist, doctor or nurse can give you further advice, if needed.

Can head lice be treated without chemicals?

Lice can be removed by wet combing with conditioner as described above under ‘How can I tell if I have head lice?’ For this to work it needs to be done carefully, every 4 days for at least 2 weeks.

Do my family and friends need treatment?

Everyone from the same household or in close contact in the previous 4 - 6 weeks should be contacted. Tell them to look for the lice but only to treat if they see them. There is no need to treat "just in case". All members of the same household who need treatment should be treated at the same time. This stops the lice being passed on again.

What about school or work?

Children with head lice can go to school but parents of their classmates and friends should be told to check for lice. Any people you have had close (head to head) contact with at work should be informed and asked to check for head lice.
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Can head lice be prevented?

It is advisable to check children’s hair every week with a fine toothed comb as described earlier in ‘How can I tell if I have head lice?’, and treat any lice straight away.

There is no evidence that repellent sprays and herbal treatments work.

Contact numbers

If you need further advice, or have any problems please contact your GP, health visitor or nurse.

Infection Prevention and Control Department telephone: 01642 383280 Monday - Friday, 9.00am - 5.00pm

Further information is available from:

NHS Choices telephone: 111 (when it is less urgent than 999) Calls to this number are free from landlines and mobile phones or via the website at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Information used in the production of this leaflet

This leaflet has been produced in partnership with patients and carers. All patient leaflets are regularly reviewed, and any suggestions you have as to how it may be improved are extremely valuable. Please write to the Quality Assurance Team, University Hospital of North Tees or email: patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk

Comments, Concerns, Compliments or Complaints

We are continually trying to improve the services we provide.

We want to know what we’re doing well or if there’s anything which we can improve, that’s why the Patient Experience Team is here to help.

Our Patient Experience Team is here to try to resolve your concerns as quickly as possible. If you would like to contact or request a copy of our PET leaflet, please contact:

    telephone: 01642 624719
    Monday – Friday, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm
    Messages can be left on the answering machine and will be picked up throughout the day.

    freephone: 0800 092 0084
    Mobile: (can use text): 0779 506 1883
    Email: patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk

Out of hours if you wish to speak to a senior member of Trust staff, please contact the hospital switchboard who will bleep the appropriate person.

    telephone: 01642 617617
    24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Patient Experience Team is available to discuss your concerns in person Monday – Friday, 1.30 pm – 4.30 pm. The office is based on the ground floor at the University Hospital of North Tees.

Data Protection and use of patient information

The Trust has developed a Data Protection Policy in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All of our staff respect this policy and confidentiality is adhered to at all times. If you require further information please contact the Information Governance Team.

    telephone: 01642 833551 or email: information.governance@nth.nhs.uk

University Hospital of North Tees, Hardwick, Stockton-on-Tees. TS19 8PE
University Hospital of Hartlepool, Holdforth Road, Hartlepool. TS24 9AH

    Telephone: 01642 617617
    Fax: 01642 624089