

Head Lice Q&A (provided by Campbell River Public Health)

1. What is the best way to treat head lice?

Research has shown that the wet combing (bug-busting) method described below is the most effective method of head lice treatment. (hill, moor et al 2005).

In the past, chemicals have been recommended to treat head lice. There is now evidence of head lice becoming resistant to some of these over the counter pediculocides (medicated shampoos). These products are also not recommended for use on pregnant or nursing mothers, or for infants under 2 years of age due to possible harmful effects of exposure to these chemicals. Unless everyone in the household is treated for head lice, the family will likely continue to re-infest one and other.

The wet combing method is simple, requires little time, and is inexpensive. The whole family can use the same comb, washing it between uses.

2. Why are there no head lice checks in schools any more?

Recent research clearly reports that the wet combing method is also the most effective technique for head lice detection.

The only way to accurately diagnose a head lice infestation is to find a live louse on a person's head. Identifying nits (lice eggs) does not mean the person currently has head lice, as the nits may have already hatched, and therefore may simply indicate an old, previously treated infestation.

Head lice move very quickly on dry heads and early or light infestations are easily missed during a dry head check.

Applying the low-cost conditioner to the wet hair immobilizes the lice, so when the fine toothed bug busting comb is then run over the scalp, they become caught in it's tines and removed from the head.

Though head lice are not able to jump, fly, or crawl on anything other than human hair, "the electrostatic charge created during a dry head check may serve to propel a louse up to one meter, thereby increasing the chance of spreading head lice from one scalp to another." (Ibarra, J. and Hall, D. 1998)

3. I have heard that I need to put toys and pillows either in the freezer, or the dryer, to kill the lice, and that I need to spray furniture with insecticide. Is this true?

No.

Head lice require certain living conditions in order to survive. They need a specific degree of warmth, and moisture, and a supply of food. They do not survive well off of the human head.

Head lice are not able to crawl on the scalp, down shoulders, on furniture, or even on pets. Their pincers are designed only to hold on to human hair, where they crawl up and down the shaft, or swing like monkeys from one strand to another. The way lice transfer from one person to another, then, is when one person's hair touches another person's hair.

Research demonstrates that there is no need to vacuum, wash, or treat with insecticide any furniture, clothing, bedding, toys, or carpets that come in contact with head lice.

Hairbrushes, hair accessories, combs, and pillowcases are the only items that need to be cleaned. (with hot soapy water at the time of wet combing treatment)

4. What about more some other more natural methods I've heard about, like tea tree oil, the electric comb etc?

Wet combing is shown to be the most effective, and is also the least expensive method of head lice treatment.

Research has shown that the wet combing (bug-busting) method described below is the most effective method for head lice treatment. It is also important to remember that even more "natural" substances can be toxic in high doses.

Given that we know the whole family may need to be treated, these chemical methods are also needlessly expensive.

5. Why can kids go to school with nits and head lice, shouldn't they be sent home?

Though we often hear of people talking about “head lice outbreaks” in schools, we know that head lice have been living on human heads for centuries, and will continue to do so. By doing a quick wet-combing head check weekly and incorporating it as part of your families’ normal hygiene practices, we will be able to control it’s spread, and avoid the more massive infestations.

6. What should I do if my child keeps getting re-infected with head lice from school?

You may be able to encourage your child to avoid “touching heads”, and to wear his/her hair tied back. Continue to perform wet combing head checks weekly.

Depending on the age of your child, you may be able to talk to him or her about the basics of head lice...that they are a common problem in childhood, and that that is why you do the checks weekly, and that they pass from one person to another when two heads touch. By normalizing this for your children, it will reduce the stigma associated with this very normal problem, and possibly lead to earlier detection and treatment for themselves and the rest of the school community.

7. What if my child has very thick, curly hair?

The wet-combing method will work on all hair types.

If you are having difficulty running the comb through the hair despite having combed out the knots, use more conditioner. Typically, one or two large handfuls of conditioner are needed.

8. Where can I get the combs?

Bug-busting combs used for wet combing are available at the Campbell River Public Health Unit in Tyee Plaza for a suggested donation of \$2.00.

Several local pharmacies carry the bug-busting kit, which consists of several combs; a wide toothed comb for untangling, the bug busting comb for removing the lice, and a nit comb. The only part of this kit that is essential for head lice treatment is the bug-busting comb. At the end of the treatment the nit comb can be used to scrape the empty eggshells (white coloured) off of the hair, but because by this time, the eggs are empty, this is not necessary.

If you have any further questions, please call public health at (250) 850-2110.