



Hatching up a treatment for head lice

According to statistics from the NSW Health Department, more than 20% of primary school students are likely to have head lice; and it's unlikely these statistics would vary too much from state to state.

The fact is anyone with a head can catch head lice — regardless of age, sex, background or how clean your hair is. Head lice spreads anywhere that people work, play and live together. Most often children get them at school — often at the start of school. Indeed, it takes only one infested head to infest a whole classroom full of heads; then our children so unselfishly pass the infestation on to the rest of the family.

Head lice are wingless insects that make their home in the hair. Their favourite hiding places are behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Female lice lay their eggs (known as nits) close to the scalp, where they remain firmly stuck to the base of the hair shaft until they hatch in about a week's time.

Head lice actually survive by feeding on blood they suck from the scalp - in a similar way to a mosquito. Unlike mosquitos, it appears head lice do not carry disease.

However, they can cause severe itching and this can lead to scratching and skin infections.

The good news is that if you or

your children have head lice, there are simple, safe and effective ways to manage the problem. Various shampoos, lotions, cream rinses and conditioners are available. Your pharmacist can advise you about which is best for you. Head lice can become resistant, and if you have used treatments before it may be desirable to change to one with a different active ingredient.

Nitbusters is a joint project in NSW between the Health Department, the Department of Education and Training and the Federation of Parents & Citizens Associations. Nitbusters is aimed not so much at eradicating head lice, because there is no evidence that any one treatment will kill all lice and eggs, but more realistically at identifying and managing head lice.

Remember whatever head lice treatment you choose, a fine toothcomb is essential to get the nits out and a good hair conditioner will get rid of the knots.

If you find dead lice, the product has worked; but you will need to retreat in 7-10 days to catch the lice that have since emerged from newly hatched eggs. For persistent cases, discuss with your pharmacist whether you need to change the treatment to another with a different active ingredient; and consider a "Nitbuster" program at your school.

For further information, our Pharmacists are available to answer any questions

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