

# Getting to grips with head lice

Head lice expert **Ian Burgess** advises on what parents should do if their child experiences a head lice outbreak and how schools might support them

**H**ead lice are a normal part of childhood. As with any other minor health problem, it is the parents who have responsibility for dealing with head lice, but schools can play a supportive role by providing parents with advice and support, while helping to educate the children.

As the new academic year begins, the subject of head lice is often high on the agenda. Research involving 650 parents, conducted by the Institute of Mums in 2017, suggests that two-thirds of school age children will catch head lice at least once, which would equate to 1.6 million infestations every year in the UK. This can cause a great deal of distress for their parents, especially if they are experiencing it for the first time.

The back to school season is a common time for parents to worry about head lice, as regular head-to-head contact makes them easy to pass on. Close contact can occur when children literally get their heads together over group project work, or get up close in the playground. SmartPhones among older children can also increase the chances of head lice spreading as children gather round phones before or after school time.



The key to successful treatment is to make sure that the usage instructions are followed carefully and that physically acting products fully saturate the hair and cover the lice. The presence of empty eggs (nits) in the hair often confuses parents into thinking that treatment hasn't worked when in fact the lice and eggs have been killed but what remains is the "debris" (see below, completing the treatment).

## Completing the treatment

The Once a Week Take a Peek research also found that four in 10 parents say stubborn lice eggs that refuse to budge after treatment are one of the most stressful aspects of dealing with head lice. As nits look the same as live eggs, they can cause parents to worry that they haven't got rid of the lice or that their child might be teased.

The most common way to remove nits is by using fingers or a comb to drag them off. Another option is using post-treatment products to help lift and loosen the nits enabling them to be combed from the hair easily.

lu

• *Ian Burgess is director of the Medical Entomology Centre, a contract research company based in Cambridge.*

## Further information

The Once a Week Take a Peek campaign was launched to raise awareness of the importance of making weekly checks as part of the family routine. To take part in the Once a Week Take a Peek campaign and download or order free resources, visit [www.onceaweektakeapeek.co.uk](http://www.onceaweektakeapeek.co.uk)

**"SmartPhones among older children can also increase the chances of head lice spreading as children gather round phones before or after school time"**

## Protection

When head lice are present in the population it is very easy for them to be passed on. If a parent is keen to look at preventative methods, they should be advised to speak to their pharmacist who can recommend a product which can easily be adopted into the daily routine.

## Checking

According to research conducted by the Once a Week Take a Peek campaign in 2014, one in four parents believe that schools still have a nit nurse, so it is good practice to remind them that this is no longer the case and encourage them to check their child's hair regularly.

Checking for head lice can easily be incorporated into the weekly routine by using a comb with teeth no more than 0.3mm apart in order to trap the lice. Details on how to check for lice can be found on the Once a Week Take a Peek website and supplies of free information leaflets and other useful resources are available to order.

## Treatment

Treatment is available from pharmacies in your local area. Products that do not contain pesticides, such as those with four per cent dimeticone, have proven to be most popular in recent years, because they act physically rather than chemically on the louse.

Research suggests lice have become resistant to traditional pesticide treatments, however treatments with a physical mode of action continue to keep working. Moreover, because the products are odourless they are also more pleasant to use.

