

# headlice

the facts and myths

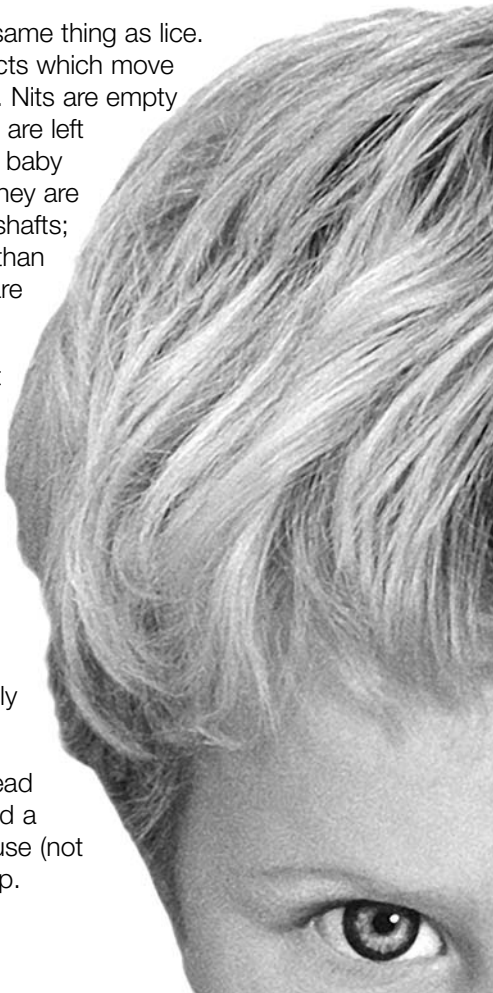
everyone's  
essential  
guide



# The lice



- ◆ Head lice are small insects with six legs. They are often said to be “as large as a match head”; in fact, they are not much bigger than a pin head, and rarely bigger than a sesame seed (the seeds on burger buns).
- ◆ They live on, or very close to the scalp, and don't wander far down the hair shafts for very long.
- ◆ The louse's mouth is like a very small needle. It sticks this into the scalp and sucks the blood.
- ◆ They only live on human beings; you can't catch them from animals.
- ◆ Nits are not the same thing as lice. Lice are the insects which move around the head. Nits are empty egg cases which are left behind when the baby louse hatches. They are stuck on to hair shafts; they are smaller than a pin head and are pearly white.
- ◆ If you have nits it doesn't always mean that you have head lice. When you have got rid of all the lice, the nits will stay stuck to the hair until it grows out or they are physically removed.
- ◆ You only have head lice if you can find a living, moving louse (not a nit) on the scalp.



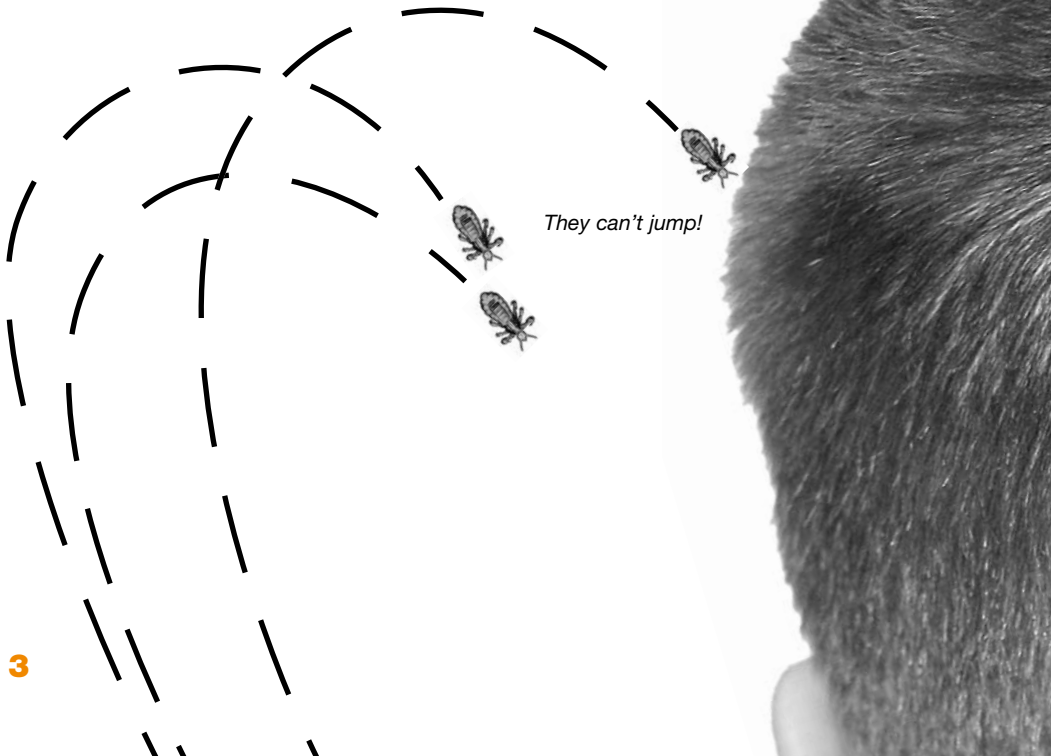
# Who and where?

- ◆ Head louse infection is a problem of the whole community, not just the schools.
- ◆ Infection is common during school holidays as well as during term time. Parents start to worry more about lice when children go back to school because they think the lice are being caught there.
- ◆ A lot of infections are caught from close family and friends in the home and community.
- ◆ It's not just children who have them; adults get them too.
- ◆ It's often said that head lice prefer clean, short hair. In fact, they probably don't care whether hair is dirty or clean, short or long.



# How you get head lice

- ◆ Head lice can walk from one head to another when the heads are touching for some time.
- ◆ You are unlikely to pick up head lice from brief contact with other people. The longer you have head to head contact with someone who has lice, the more likely it is you will get them too.
- ◆ They can't swim, fly, hop or jump. The idea that they can jump may have come from the fact that, when dry hair is combed, a head louse caught on the teeth of the comb is sometimes flicked off by static electricity (this is one reason why detection combing should be done on damp hair).
- ◆ You don't get them from objects such as the chair back.



# What happens next?



◆ If you catch one or two lice, they may breed and increase slowly in number. At this stage, most people don't have any symptoms and won't know they have lice unless they look very carefully for them.

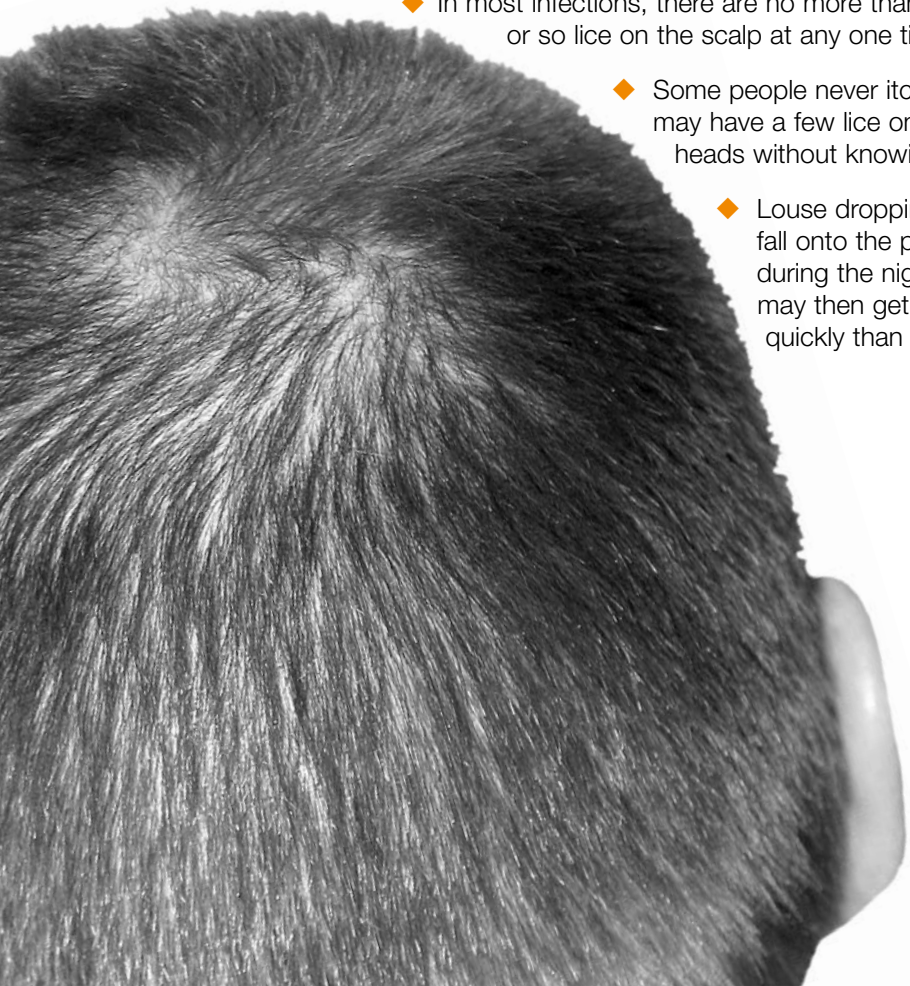
◆ For the first two or three months, there is usually no itch, but then the scalp may start to itch badly. This is due to an allergy, not to the louse bites themselves.

◆ Most people only realise they have head lice when this itch starts.

◆ In most infections, there are no more than a dozen or so lice on the scalp at any one time.

◆ Some people never itch. They may have a few lice on their heads without knowing.

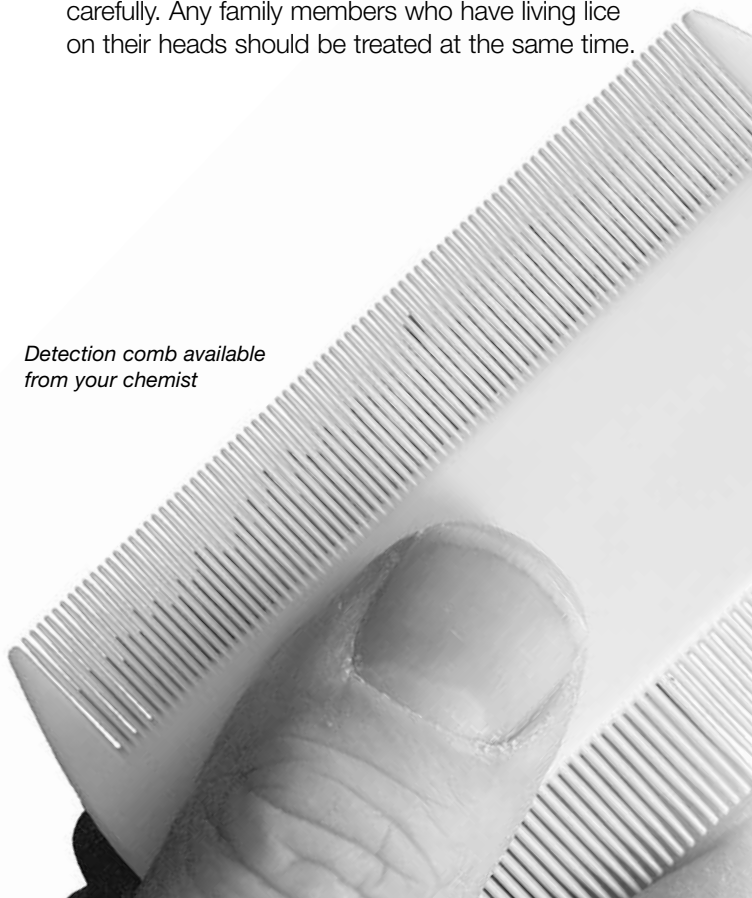
◆ Louse droppings may fall onto the pillow during the night. Pillows may then get dirty more quickly than usual.



# Prevention - can you stop them?

- ◆ Combing is an important part of good personal care, but head lice are not easily damaged by it. Good hair care may help to spot lice early and so help to control them.
- ◆ The best way to stop infection is for families to learn how to check their own heads. This way they can find any lice before they have a chance to breed. They can then treat them and stop them going round the family.
- ◆ The way to check heads is called 'detection combing'. It can be done as often as families want to, but should be done weekly.
- ◆ If a living, moving louse is found on one of the family's heads, the others should be checked carefully. Any family members who have living lice on their heads should be treated at the same time.

*Detection comb available  
from your chemist*



# Detection combing

- ◆ You need: fine toothed detection comb (from the chemist), good lighting, ordinary comb.
- ◆ Wash the hair well, then dry it with a towel.
- ◆ The hair should be damp, not dripping.
- ◆ Make sure there is good light. Daylight is best.
- ◆ Comb the hair with an ordinary comb.
- ◆ You can buy a detection comb from the chemist.
- ◆ Start with the teeth of the detection comb touching the skin of the scalp at the top of the head. Draw the comb carefully towards the end of the hair shafts.
- ◆ Look carefully at the teeth of the comb in good light.
- ◆ Do this over and over again from the top of the head to the edge of the hair in all directions, working round the head.
- ◆ Do this for several minutes. It takes 10 to 15 minutes to do it properly for each head.
- ◆ If there are head lice, you will find one or more lice on the teeth of the comb.
- ◆ Head lice are little insects with moving legs.
- ◆ Clean the comb under the tap. A nail brush helps to do this.
- ◆ If you find something and you are not sure what it is, stick it on a piece of paper with clear sticky tape and show it to your school nurse or family doctor. There can be other things in the hair which are not lice.
- ◆ If you need help and advice, ask your local chemist, health visitor, school nurse or family doctor.



# How to treat head lice

- ◆ You should only ever treat someone for head lice if you have found a living, moving louse.
- ◆ The best treatment is to use lotion\* (not shampoo and mousses) from the chemist. Your doctor may issue you with a prescription.
- ◆ Always follow manufacturers' instructions on how to use the lotion\*. How long you leave the lotion\* on the head may vary depending on the product.
- ◆ 'Alternative' head louse treatments such as tea tree oil, petrol or vinegar are claimed to treat head lice. There is no evidence that they work.

\*  
For simplicity the term lotion used in this document includes all types of licensed products, except shampoos (which are ineffective).

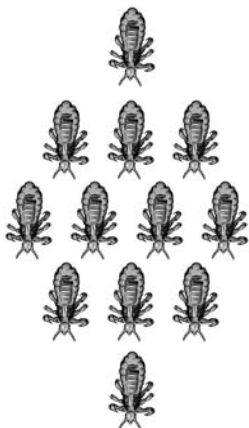
## *How to use the lotion* \*

- ◆ put the lotion\* on to dry hair.
- ◆ part the hair near the top of the head, put a few drops on to the scalp and rub it in. Part the hair a bit further down the scalp and do the same again. Do this over and over again until the whole scalp is wet.
- ◆ apply lotion\* **according to manufacturers instructions.**
- ◆ keep the lotion\* out of the eyes and off the face. One way is to hold a cloth over the face.
- ◆ let the lotion\* dry on the hair. Some lotions\* can catch fire, so keep well away from flames, cigarettes, stoves and other sources of heat. Don't use a hair dryer.
- ◆ **treat again seven days later in the same way with the same lotion\*.**
- ◆ check a day or two after the second treatment. If you still find living, moving lice, ask your local chemist, health visitor, school nurse or family doctor for advice.



# The problem won't go away

- ◆ The problem may not be head lice at all. We all start to itch as soon as head lice are mentioned.
- ◆ There are other causes for itching of the scalp. Using head louse lotion can make these worse.
- ◆ Using lotion\* over and over again may cause dermatitis, which itself makes the head itch.
- ◆ When living, moving lice are found, they can almost always be cleared by using the right lotion\*. This will only work if enough of it is used, if it is put on in the right way, and if any other family members who have lice are treated properly at the same time and repeated after 7 days.
- ◆ A day or two after using the lotion\*, you sometimes find little lice still there. These have hatched out of the eggs since you put the lotion\* on, and will be killed if you put the lotion\* on again after seven days.
- ◆ When you have got rid of the lice, you might still itch for two to three weeks. This doesn't mean you still have lice. Check the head carefully using detection combing.
- ◆ When you have got rid of all the lice, the nits (empty egg cases stuck on the hairs) will still be there. This doesn't mean you still have lice.
- ◆ People who think their children keep on getting head lice may have made the mistakes listed above, and may keep on 'treating' lice which have long since been cleared, or were never even there



in the first place.

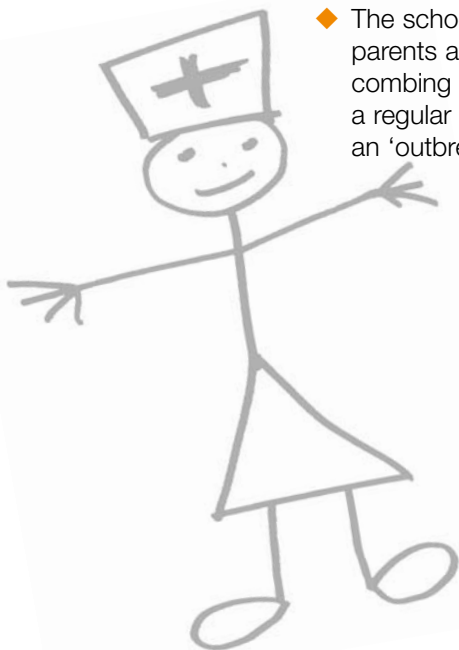
- ◆ If children do really keep on having living lice, this is most likely to be due to not doing the treatment properly and not treating all those close contacts who have also been found to have lice. Remember, if infection really does keep happening, it is almost always from a member of the family, or a close friend. It is rarely from other children in the classroom except from a 'best friend'.
- ◆ If you still have problems, ask your family doctor, health visitor, local chemist, or a school nurse if a



# What the school can do

'wet-combing' (bug-busting) method to remove the head lice might help.

- ◆ Schools must remember that most lice are caught in the family and the local community, not in the classroom.
- ◆ 'Nitty Nora' head checks will not help, but the school nurse can advise and support parents to check their own families.
- ◆ 'Alert' letters should not be sent out. They are unhelpful and can cause an 'outbreak' of imaginary lice.
- ◆ Children who may have lice should not be excluded from school; if they do have lice, they will probably have been infected for weeks already. The school nurse can help the parents to make sure there really are lice there, and advise how to get rid of them if they are.
- ◆ The school should give information on lice for parents and staff including regular detection combing and how to do it. This should be done on a regular basis, not just when there is thought to be an 'outbreak', and should be done in collaboration



# What families can do

with the school nurse. Talks for parents by the school nurse can be helpful.

- ◆ Make sure that all family members know about good hair care, including regular, thorough combing.
- ◆ The only way to control head lice is to check the heads of all the people in your home using a special plastic detection comb from the chemist.
- ◆ All the family means everyone (adults as well as children) in the same household.
- ◆ Don't treat unless you are sure you have found living, moving head lice in your family, tell your relatives and close friends so that they can check their own heads. Treat any of your family you are sure have lice at the same time. Ask at chemists, the surgery, or the school nurse which lotion\* you should use and follow the instructions on the bottle.
- ◆ Treat everyone who has live lice in the family at the same time with a head louse lotion\* (not shampoo).
- ◆ Remember, never use the lotion\* unless you are sure you have found living, moving head lice (not nits). It is never a good idea to use chemicals if they are not needed.
- ◆ Try not to worry too much about head lice. They are unpleasant, but they rarely do any harm other than causing an itchy scalp.

*For simplicity the term lotion used in this document includes all types of licensed products, except shampoos (which are ineffective).*



Date reviewed 2009

Next review 2011