



# Nit picking

We offer some practical guidance for tackling a common childhood complaint

**'WE THINK WE'VE GOT IT SUSSSED!'**

**Paula Chatfield, 41, full-time mum**

An effective combing technique can be a great alternative to lotions, as Paula found out when her daughter Isobel was getting infested on a monthly basis. A leaflet handed out by Isobel's nursery showed Paula how to break the pests' life cycle by combing to remove egg-laying adult females. 'The key to making life easier has been finding a brilliant nit comb,' said Paula, who favours the Nitty Gritty metal comb.

Paula makes hair tangle-free, using a healthy dose of conditioner to help the comb slide through the hair. She told us it's important to 'comb through rigorously' from scalp to tip, focusing on a batch of hair at a time.

Paula dips the comb in a white, water-filled bowl to identify lice and eggs, and clears it with a nail brush. She said: 'You can see what stage the infestation's at by the number and size of the lice and eggs.' Repeating this every three days up to five times should get rid of adult lice, then babies, and finally eggs, breaking the life cycle. 'We think we've got it sussded!' Paula said.

**H**ead lice are a rite of passage that every parent can expect their child to face. Pharmacist Graham Phillips reassures us: 'It's just part of life. Don't worry and don't get upset – your pharmacist will help you sort it out.'

While anyone can catch head lice, our survey (see 'Our research', opposite) found that in the majority of cases our members said it was their child that had suffered. Long gone are the days of the school nit nurse – today's parents must take an active role in checking for and managing infestations. Here, we look at a range of tips and treatments for controlling head lice.

## Choosing a treatment

If you want to shift head lice quickly, our survey indicates that over-the-counter products are your best option. Almost half of our members used these products and 59 per cent of them said the lice went away in three days or less. However, our survey also revealed that no one treatment method is necessarily superior in terms of satisfaction – overall, members were satisfied with whatever type of treatment they used.

When we investigated whether any

clinical trials had proven which treatment was best, we found varying results.

Dr Nigel Hill, Medical Entomologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, found that the Bug Buster Kit (a combing and conditioning method from head lice charity Community Hygiene Concern) was more effective than conventional medicated treatments that poison lice. The medicated treatments contained the insecticides Malathion and Permethrin, which are found in products such as Derbac M and Lyclear Creme Rinse.

But the manufacturer of Derbac M, SSL International, rejected these results, saying that Dr Hill should have repeated its treatment seven days later. At the time, this recommendation wasn't on the instructions.

Chefaro, manufacturer of Lyclear Creme Rinse, said it had received just seven reports of lack of efficacy since July 2004, compared with sales of nearly three million.

Clinical trials on Hedrin, a physical treatment that drowns lice, have broadly shown it to be as effective as insecticidal products.

There's little evidence for the effectiveness of natural insecticides or essential oils – although a clinical trial is currently being carried out on neem oil-based Nice 'n Clear. Besides, Dr Graham Archard, from the Royal College of General Practitioners, told us: 'Other over-the-counter treatments have very stringent safety tests – you don't get this with herbal remedies.'

These mixed conclusions show there's no clear winner. Only you can decide which treatment is right for your child, as personal circumstances, including time and hair type, will affect which is best to use. 'Heading off the lice', opposite, lists the pros and cons of each type of treatment to help you choose.

## Resisting the treatment

Not following a product's instructions can help head lice build immunity. Several treatments instruct to leave the product on overnight, otherwise lice could be exposed to a non-lethal dose, encouraging resistance in adult lice or any that hatch after treatment.

## MYTH BUSTER

We reveal the truth about some common head lice myths



PREFER CLEAN HAIR



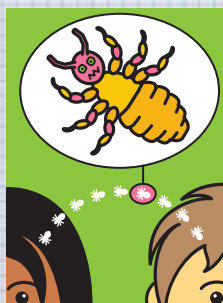
INFECT BOTH CLEAN AND DIRTY HAIR



PREFER LONG HAIR



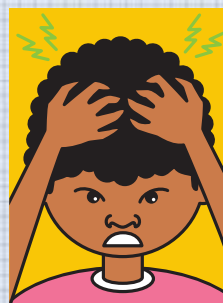
INFECT ALL LENGTHS AND TYPES OF HAIR



JUMP AND CAN SPREAD VIA CLOTHES/TOWELS



WALK FROM HEAD TO HEAD



ALWAYS MEANS ITCHY SCALPS



ONLY ITCHES IF ALLERGIC TO BITES/FAECES



## HEADING OFF THE LICE

Advice from our experts on available methods to treat you or your child



**Combs** Manual comb is around £1.79 to £10 in pharmacies; use with hair conditioner. A battery-operated comb is about £14 to £24 in Argos and online.  
**Pros** No resistance concerns, reusable, no insecticides, also used to detect lice.  
**Cons** Fiddly, takes about two weeks, metal combs can hurt. Efficacy not conclusive for electric combs.

**Synthetic chemical insecticides** Around £8.49 to £11.49 in pharmacies. Products include Derbac M, Full Marks Liquid, Full Marks Mousse, Full Marks Lotion, Lyclear Creme Rinse.  
**Pros** Easy to apply, various trials have shown they work.  
**Cons** Can be prone to resistance, varying effectiveness in clinical trials.

**Physical action to kill lice** Around £5.99 to £11.49 in pharmacies. Products include Hedrin and Full Marks Solution.  
**Pros** No insecticides (Hedrin drowns lice and Full Marks Solution dehydrates them), resistance unlikely, odourless.  
**Cons** Trials have shown degrees of efficacy but more evidence is needed.

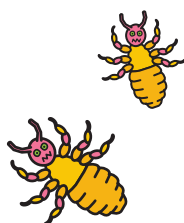
**Natural insecticides/essential oils** £6 to £10 in pharmacies and online. Products include Boots Head Lice Remover, Lyclear Sprayaway, Nice 'n Clear, Quit Nits Head Lice Remover.  
**Pros** Resistance less likely, easy to apply.  
**Cons** Little clinical research into efficacy of treatments, potential side effects not known.

Dr Hill says natural insecticides are less likely to lead to resistance than synthetic medicated treatments. Lice are also unlikely to become resistant to treatments that kill by physical means, such as drowning.

Some experts say insecticides that promise to work after a short contact time could promote resistance, as they may expose lice to a non-lethal dose of insecticide. Both Dr Hill and Graham Phillips urge parents not to use these types of treatment – Phillips won't stock them in his pharmacy.

When we put this to Chefaro, it said that trials had demonstrated that the ten-minute contact time of Lyclear Creme Rinse was sufficient to kill lice. It added that there has been no evidence from customers that the product has not worked.

A recent clinical trial on people showed Full Marks Solution – a physical treatment, not an insecticide – had a significantly higher cure rate than Lyclear Creme Rinse, despite both being ten-minute treatments. But Full Marks' manufacturer, SSL, said it's not aware of any human trials proving the effectiveness of 30-minute treatment Full Marks Mousse, an insecticide. It also said there is no evidence to support concerns about the effectiveness and resistance of treatments with a short contact time.



**Regularly checking children for lice will help to manage infestation**



## Working together

As well as using 'Heading off the lice', above, to help you to choose an effective treatment, regularly checking your children for lice helps manage infestation – see our 'Checklist', right, for tips.

Which? member Claire Curtis thinks that Bug Busting Days hosted by Community Hygiene Concern (see 'Contacts', below) for parents and schools could also help. She told us: 'I'm considering suggesting a Bug Busting Day. Parents need advice with this – there is a stigma, even though there really shouldn't be!' The next National Bug Busting Day is on 15 June.

## Contacts

Community Hygiene Concern  
01908 561928; [www.chc.org](http://www.chc.org)  
 Department of Health  
020 7210 4850; [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

## OUR RESEARCH

236 members whose household experienced head lice in the previous two years took part in our online survey in October and November 2007.

## Checklist

A few simple steps can help ward off head lice

**Be a detective** People with lice don't always show symptoms, so check your child's hair regularly using a fine-toothed comb.



**Repeat action** When using over-the-counter products, repeat the treatment seven to ten days after the first course to kill any newly hatched lice.

**Treat on sight** The experts we spoke to recommend using medicated products only when head lice are seen, rather than to try to prevent children from catching lice. 'If you repeatedly use these pesticides and end up with non-lethal residues on the scalp, it can help develop resistance,' Dr Hill said.

**Spread the word** Telling the school when your child has lice will help cut reinfestation but, in our survey, 31 per cent of people whose children had head lice didn't do so. If a child's not being treated, the Department for Children, Schools and Families advises contacting the school or school nurse, the Primary Care Trust or the local authority.

**Tackle curls** Wet hair and pile on conditioner. Use a wide-toothed comb to straighten, then clip hair into four quarters. Use a fine-toothed comb to check for lice and a spray bottle of water to wet the hair. Which? member David Hawkyard couldn't comb lice out of his son's dreadlocked hair, but said: 'We had success with four treatments of Hedrin.'