

# Tips on how to eliminate head lice for good

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Aoine, Meán Fómhair 02, 2016

It's an alien invasion dreaded by every parent but with due diligence and the right products, head lice can be eliminated for good, says **Helen O Callaghan**.



HOW do people feel when they discover their child has head lice?

This was the subject of a 2013 study published in the International Journal of Dermatology.

Not surprisingly, 79% felt a 'strong negative response', with one-fifth of respondents reporting disgust. One mam said: "I felt disgusted and ready for combat." Another spoke of wanting "to cry, realising how much work it would be to get it out of my house".

Yet head lice — common parasites that have never been eradicated — are very prevalent, with one in 10 children affected at any one time, says West Cork-based pharmacist Caitríona Ní Ríordáin. "It's a rite of passage. It comes to every house."

Andrew Hennessy, owner of The Hair Experts, has trained in the extraction and elimination of head lice and says that in Britain, the problem is seen as next in prevalence to the common cold. So the first thing anyone visited by head lice needs to realise is you're not alone, there are many others doing battle too.

Galway-based practise nurse Sally Whelan recommends parents take a very calm, pragmatic approach. "Avoid passing on feelings of disgust, anger and frustration to your child. Over-reacting can upset them and you want a happy child. You just have to accept and deal with the situation. See it as a project."

A fully grown louse is about the size of a sesame seed. It doesn't fly but climbs from one hair to another and is passed on by head-to-head contact.

"Traditionally, head lice would have been confined to the under-12s because they tend to have more physical contact. But in the last two years — because of the advent of selfies — we're seeing it in secondary schools too," says Ní Ríordáin.

Nits are the tiny eggs, about the size of a pinhead — brownish in colour if the louse has hatched and pale white if it hasn't. They tend to be concentrated behind the ears or in the nape of the neck and can be mistaken for dandruff. The difference is: dandruff will move easily/ freely when you try to flick it away.

It's a myth that head lice are attracted to dirty hair. "It's unrelated to hygiene," says Ní Ríordáin.

Nor are some types of hair more prone to them. And although itching is a sign, the lice will be there for some time before itching occurs.

"It's an allergy to the lice that causes itching. Irritation builds up over time. Just because a child isn't itching doesn't mean they don't have them." Early detection is crucial, says Ní Ríordáin. "You need to catch them before they multiply." And they reproduce fast, with a lifespan of 30 days.

Hennessy describes the life cycle: Up to day six the egg (nit) isn't visible. Between days six and eight, it becomes visible and hatches around now. Between days eight and 14, it becomes an adult louse and can mate, with the female laying up to 88 eggs. "Because they're not visible [for a period] it catches people out. It really is a war," says Hennessy.

“We’re seeing hundreds every month, mainly eight to 13-year-olds. Typically, parents ring and say the child has had head lice for anything from two months to a year. We see incredibly stressed parents and distressed children,” he says.

Hennessy puts the persistence of the lice down to the fact that parents aren’t doing enough combing. “Parents look at product labels that offer 100% success. But that success is only achievable with forensic combing and comprehensive extraction of the eggs,” he says. Hennessy’s approach is to use a special vacuum system that extracts all the live lice into a special filter system, allowing for examination regarding quality and size of infestation. “Then we manually extract the nits using fine tooth combs and specific tweezers.”

Step two of the process involves the child coming back after seven days to check that all have been removed. “We extract any egg that has become visible. We would always expect to extract something on the second visit,” he says.

Any parent who returns a few weeks later with a child who still has a lice problem hasn’t maintained preventive combing every seven to 10 days, says Hennessy. “That’s the crux of the problem. In Ireland, we don’t have an ethos of preventive combing. And because we’re not proactive about the problem, we’re reactive to it.”

\* Visit [www.thehairexperts.ie](http://www.thehairexperts.ie)

### **Tackling tips - Pharmacist Caitríona Ní Ríordáin recommends:**

- \* Early detection is the best solution. Check child’s hair once a week to catch lice before they multiply.
- \* Do this with a special lice comb (available in pharmacies). Divide wet, conditioned hair into six or eight sections. Using plenty of conditioner temporarily immobilises lice so they’re easier to detect. Comb from root to tip. Clean the comb with tissue after every comb through.
- \* Use very strong light or daylight to try to detect the nits. “You’re hoping to comb them out but you have to work very diligently to do so,” says Ní Ríordáin.
- \* Apply the treatment product, which will kill only the adult lice. Products mainly work by coating lice and preventing them breathing. Lice have evolved immunity to pesticide-based products but the newer products aren’t pesticides — they coat lice and dehydrate them.
- \* When treating a child for head lice, Ní Ríordáin says she would comb his/her head every day until the next treatment in seven days, when you’re hoping to catch any that have hatched (since the first treatment) before they reproduce.
- \* Do not use the treatment product preventatively — it won’t work. There’s limited evidence showing that tea tree oil spray repels lice and slows down their speed. Spray every morning before the child goes to school. To prevent hair-to-hair contact with other children, you could tie long hair back in a tight plait or keep hair short.
- \* Everybody in the family must be checked if lice are found on one head. If nothing’s found on other family members, there’s no need to treat them. Continue checking everybody as long as you’re checking the affected person.
- \* It’s considered good manners to inform your child’s school. “This serves as a memory jog for all to begin checking again,” says Ní Ríordáin.