

NIT WIT

It's back-to-school time which means head lice could soon make an appearance in your home. Nicole Thomas provides some tips to help you bite back.

Head lice. Two words to send you into an itching frenzy and now that the kids are going back to school they may well become infected with these 'friendly' parasites. That doesn't mean you can't put up a solid fight against the little critters, though. Let's have a look at what makes head lice tick and how you can prevent – and cure – a case of nits.

UNWANTED GUESTS

These small wingless parasites have been around for thousands of years but their life cycle isn't so expansive – roughly 32 to 35 days. After this the eggs from the first infestation begin to hatch and you have round two of the head lice saga.

The main symptom of head lice, besides actually seeing their tiny whitish-brown bodies or white egg sacs (nits), is itching. Dr Chris Lease, Director of Health Protection at SA Health, explains it's actually the saliva from the lice that causes this itching sensation. "Basically they feed off your blood and when they bite you the saliva is an irritant that causes the itching," he says.

SPREADING THE LOVE

Head-to-head (and hair-to-hair) contact is a biggie with passing on these little suckers. "Lice don't survive very long off the human body," Dr Lease explains.

To prevent an outbreak you can try the following measures:

- avoid head-to-head contact
- try not to share combs, brushes and any head gear, and wash school hats on a regular basis
- brush your children's hair and check for head lice on a regular basis
- tie up long hair and try to discourage children from playing with each others' hair.

BITING BACK

You have several options when it comes to treating head lice. You can use head lice shampoo or conditioner, strictly following the instructions. Lice can develop chemical resistance so it's paramount that you not only complete the full treatment but that if one fails you try another avenue.

"What we find with a lot of bugs is that over time the use of chemicals can build up resistance. That's why we recommend to people that if they've tried something like a chemical treatment that hasn't worked, to try an alternative," Dr Lease advises.

One alternative is the wet-comb technique, which involves wetting and conditioning the hair thoroughly and then combing out the lice and eggs with a very fine lice comb. This needs to be done every second day until you haven't found any living lice for 10 days.

Lastly, you can also use topical application of essential oils such as tea tree and lavender as a natural remedy.

DAMAGE CONTROL

After an outbreak you can go into a cleaning frenzy, and Dr Lease does advise that you wash and change infected pillowcases, but don't go too nuts because this is a human-only parasite. That's right – your pets have a get-out-of-jail-free card on the lice front. The rest of the family doesn't get off so easily.

"Lice are our own human things, they've learned to live with us and they're very specialised at it. It's all about the human head, that's where they like to be and that's where they'll stay," says Dr Lease.

Yes, head lice are nasty human-specific bedfellows, but with the proper information and tools you can beat the little suckers. ❖

TRUE OR FALSE?

- Head lice are able to jump from head to head. **False.**
- Someone infected with head lice can show no symptoms at all – not even scratching. **True.**
- Head lice prefer dirty hair. **False.**
- You should keep your child home from school if they have head lice. **False** (as long as they have begun treatment).
- Your pet can give you head lice. **False.**

HELPLINES



Banlice Mousse ² (200g \$17.49, members \$13.99) **KP24 Medicated Foam** ² (100ml \$17.99, members \$14.39) **Moov Head Lice Solution** ² (200ml \$19.99, members \$15.99) **Moov Head Lice Shampoo** ² (500ml \$32.99, members \$26.39) **Nyda Plus** ² (100ml \$32.99, \$26.39)

² Always read the label. Use only as directed. If symptoms persist, see your doctor or healthcare professional.

