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Department of Health

The Centre for Health Protection is a professional arm of the Department of Health for disease prevention and control

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## Head Lice

### Causative agent

Head lice, *Pediculus humanus capitis*, are tiny parasite which affect human only. They are most commonly found among the hair, on the scalp, behind the ears and near the neckline at the back of the neck. They are occasionally found on the eyebrows or beard.

### Clinical features

The most common symptom is tickling sensation and itching over the scalp. Excessive scratching may cause bleeding or sore of the scalp which may increase the risk of microbial infection.

Under careful inspection, eggs of head lice can be found at the base of the hair near the scalp. Eggs may appear white, yellowish, brownish or greyish. They are often confused from dandruff. Eggs for head lice are usually shiny, oval in shape and firmly attached to the hair shaft, while dandruff are dull, flaky and loose enough to fall off easily.

### Mode of transmission

The lice cannot jump or fly from one hair to another. The main mode of transmission is through direct hair-to-hair contact with infested people and less common through sharing their personal items such as combs, hats, and headgears. Anyone may catch head lice. Preschool and elementary age children are of higher risk because they often get close contact with each other during play.

### Incubation period

The life cycle of head lice has three stages: the eggs, the nymphs and the adults. The eggs hatch in 7-10 days; the nymphs takes 7-13 days to become adults. Once mature they reproduce and the number can increase alarmingly. Both nymphs and adults need to feed on human blood. Their live spans is approximately 28 to 30 days and they usually die 2 days after falling off from the host.

### Management

1. People who are suspected to have head lice should seek medical advice immediately.
2. Medicated lotion/shampoo will be prescribed to kill head lice and patients must follow the treatment instructions fully.
3. Patients should use a fine-tooth comb to remove the eggs.
4. Personal belongings such as brushes, combs, hats and bed linen should be washed with hot water and detergent thoroughly.

### Prevention

1. Avoid close contact with infested people.
2. Do not share hair brushes, combs, hats or pillows.
3. Wash bed linen and clothes frequently and maintain personal hygiene.
4. Check hair regularly for any signs of head lice.
5. Household contacts and close personal contacts of infested people should be screened for head lice.

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