

Head lice fact sheet for hairdressers

Head lice infections are common and create concern for many families. Information given to people regarding head lice is often conflicting and in some cases incorrect. This fact sheet provides accurate information for hairdressers and their clients.

Head lice facts

Head lice do not transmit any infectious diseases and there is no evidence to suggest the environment is a significant concern in the transmission of head lice.

They are fragile insects, easily killed by water temperatures greater than 60°C, however this temperature is too hot for washing hair. The guidelines for cleaning and handling of instruments/equipment should be followed (see figure 1).

No disinfection or fumigation of the salon is required.

Head lice have been around for many thousands of years. Anyone can get head lice and given the chance head lice move from head to head without discrimination.

Head lice are small, wingless, blood sucking insects. Their colour varies from whitish-brown to reddish-brown.

Head lice only survive on humans. If isolated from the head they die very quickly, usually within 24 hours.

Under the Public Health and Wellbeing Regulations 2009 there is no Regulation preventing a person with head lice or their eggs from using or attending a hairdressing salon.

People get head lice from direct hair to hair contact with another person who has head lice. This can happen when people play, cuddle or work closely together. Head lice do not have wings or jumping legs so they cannot fly or jump from head to head. They can only crawl.

Finding head lice

Many people with head lice never scratch their heads, so itchiness is an unreliable sign. Head lice can crawl and hide. The easiest and most effective way to find them is to follow these steps:

Step 1

Comb any type of hair conditioner on dry, brushed (detangled) hair. This stuns the lice and makes it difficult for them to grip the hair or run around.

Step 2

Comb sections of the hair with a fine tooth head lice comb.

Step 3

Wipe the conditioner from the comb onto a paper towel or tissue.

Step 4

Look on the tissue and on the comb for lice and eggs.

Step 5

Repeat the combing for every part of the head at least 4 or 5 times.

Hair should only be treated when live head lice (crawlers) or eggs are found. If hair has been treated recently and there are only empty hatched eggs, there may not be a need to treat again as the empty eggs could be from a previous episode.

Head lice are found on the hair itself and move to the scalp to feed. They have six legs which end in a claw and they rarely fall from the head.

Louse eggs (also called nits) are laid within 1.5cm of the scalp and are firmly attached to the hair. They resemble dandruff but can't be brushed off.

To optimise treatment as many eggs as possible should be removed.

Head lice treatment

Head lice products must be applied to all parts of the hair and scalp.

No treatment kills all the eggs so treatment involves two applications seven days apart. The first treatment kills all lice; the second treatment kills young head lice hatched over the next six days.

Combs with long, rounded stainless steel teeth positioned very close together are the most effective.

There is no need to treat the whole family, unless they also have head lice. If you are using lotions, apply the product to dry hair. For shampoos, wet the hair, but use the least amount of water possible.

If you choose not to use an insecticide, the conditioner and comb method can be used every second day until there have been no live head lice found for ten days.

Testing resistance

Head lice products belong in one of the following categories depending on the active compound they contain:

- pyrethrins
- synthetic pyrethroids (permethrin and bioallethrin)
- organophosphates (maldison or malathion)
- herbal; with or without natural (non-chemical) pyrethrins.

Insecticide resistance is a complex and common problem.

Advise people to test if head lice are dead. If they are dead, treatment using the same product in seven days is recommended. If the head lice are not dead, the treatment has not worked and the head lice are resistant to the product and all products containing the same active compound. Use a product with a different active compound or the comb and conditioner method.

Any head lice product could cause a reaction and should be used with care on:

- women who are pregnant or breastfeeding
- children less than 12 months
- people with allergies, asthma or open wounds on the scalp.

If you are unsure, please check with your pharmacist or doctor.

Preventing head lice

There is no product available to prevent head lice. Using the conditioner and comb method once a week will help you detect head lice early and reduce the problem.

Tying back long hair can help prevent the spread of head lice.

Further information

See <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/headlice>

The information in this fact sheet is based on the research conducted and written by Associate Professor Rick Speare and the team of researchers at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, James Cook University.

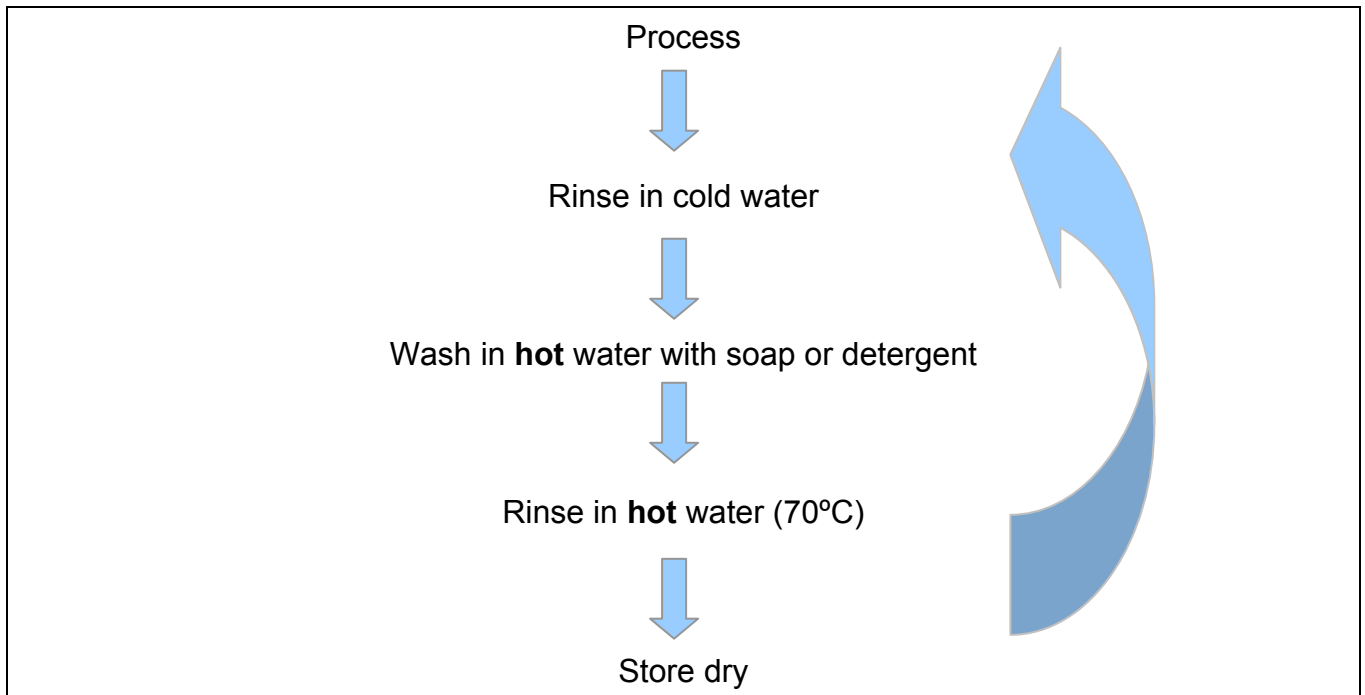


Figure 1: Cleaning and handling of instruments/equipment