What is dandruff?

Dandruff is itching and flaking of the scalp that some people start getting around puberty. The skin of the scalp has many layers. Cells start growing in the dermis at the bottom, and work their way up until they form a layer of dead cells on the skin surface.

These dead cells fall off in small flakes which we don't even notice. Washing your hair or brushing it gets rid of these tiny flakes.

For some people however, there are many more big flakes and their scalp gets to be very itchy. These big flakes are what we call dandruff - and they can be very distressing because they can show up on your hair and on your clothes. Some people might think you don't take good care of your appearance even when you are trying hard - but really most people won't notice these flakes as much as you do!

How do you get dandruff?

It is not clear why some people get dandruff, and others don't, but there are some things that we do know about it.

> It seems to start happening around puberty, when a lot more oil is made by glands at the base of each hair. This oil holds the tiny flakes together to make bigger, more noticeable flakes. Boys get more oily hair than girls, and boys have dandruff more often than girls.

> A tiny fungus seems to be part of the reason some people get dandruff. This fungus is called Malassezia (mal-a-sea-zee-a). Why do they make these names so long and complicated? This fungus makes the skin cells grow much faster, so there are a lot more dead cells and these mix with the hair oils to make bigger flakes.

> There are some other things that can cause flaky, itchy skin, such as ring worm and dermatitis. Your doctor would be able to look at your hair and tell you if you have one of these problems or dandruff.

What can you do about dandruff?

Well, the first thing is to work out if you really have dandruff, or do you just have the normal tiny flakes of dead cells which everyone has.

Have a talk with your mum or dad, or with your doctor, to see whether you really do have a problem.

There are several different things you can try to see if you can improve your scalp health.

> First, if you have oily hair, using a gentle shampoo every day will get rid of the extra oil. Since the oil holds the flakes together making big, noticeable flakes, getting rid of the oil is enough for some people.

> Avoid hair products like hair gels. These hold on to the tiny flakes making bigger lumps too.

> Then there are the treatments, such as anti-dandruff shampoos. These can be expensive, but can be helpful if you are having problems with dandruff.
You can get many of the shampoos 'over-the-counter' at chemist shops.

Different types of shampoos work in different ways - some can affect the colour of your hair and some people can be allergic to some of the products. So have a talk to the chemist before you spend your money.

When you use one of these products, it is important to leave it on your scalp for the amount of time it says on the bottle before you wash it off.

You may need to use one of these shampoos every day to start with, then, as the dandruff gets better, use the product about twice a week for a while.

If you have dandruff that is not getting better even when you have tried a couple of different types of products, go back to see your doctor. He or she may be able to prescribe a different treatment which could work.

**Remember, dandruff is treatable.**

Did you know...

Tea tree oil kills fungus, and can be helpful for some people who have dandruff and who would prefer to use a 'natural' product - but be careful...

- 'raw' tea tree oil can hurt broken skin, or irritate healthy skin
- some people are allergic to tea tree oil, and that could cause even more itching and scaling.

Test it on a different part of your skin before you try it on your head.

**What kids say**

- "My grandma told me that her mum used to rub her head with an onion to get rid of dandruff. I think it was before they had shampoo, though." Ellena
- "I rinse my hair with vinegar once a month. My mum does too. She says it makes our hair shiny and healthy. We don't have dandruff." Kimberley

**Dr Kate says:**

"Sometimes your scalp may be flaky and itchy because it is too dry. Maybe you wash it too much. Do you use hair conditioner?

Getting out into the fresh air and exercising is a good way to get your body working as it should. But if you do have dandruff there are lots of different types of anti-dandruff treatments and if one is not working for you there are others that may be able to help. There are some treatments that can only be prescribed by a doctor - so get your parent to take you to see a doctor if the other treatments are not working."