

Pubic Lice Fact Sheet

What are pubic lice?

Also called crab lice or “crabs,” pubic lice are parasitic insects found primarily in the pubic or genital area of humans. Pubic lice infestation is found worldwide and occurs in all races, ethnic groups and levels of society.

Where do pubic lice come from?

Phthirus pubis, the pubic or crab louse, is an insect of the order Psocodea and is an ectoparasite whose only hosts are humans. They have three stages: egg, nymph and adult. Eggs (nits) are laid on a hair shaft. Females will lay approximately 30 eggs during their 3-4 week life span. Nits are oval and usually yellow to white. Pubic lice nits take about 6-10 days to hatch and become nymphs, which look like a smaller version of the adult louse. The nymphs undergo 3 molts before becoming adults. Nymphs take about 2-3 weeks after hatching to mature into adults capable of reproducing. Nymphs must feed on blood to survive. Adults are 1.5-2.0 mm long and are flattened. Pubic lice have 6 legs; their two front legs are very large and look like the pincher claws of a crab. Pubic lice are tan to grayish-white in color. Adults are found only on human host and require human blood to survive. If adults are forced off the host they will die within 24-48 hours without feeding on blood.

What are the symptoms of pubic lice infestation?

Symptoms include itching in the genital area and visible nits (lice eggs) or crawling lice.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

People do not usually get any symptoms until they have had pubic lice for about 5 days. Some people never get symptoms.

How are pubic lice spread?

Pubic lice are usually spread through sexual contact and are most common in adults. Occasionally pubic lice may be spread by close personal contact or contact with articles such as clothing, bed linens, and towels that have been used by an infested person. Animals do not get or spread pubic lice. Pubic lice found on children may be a sign of sexual exposure or abuse. It would be extremely rare for pubic lice to be spread by sitting on a toilet seat because pubic lice cannot live for long away from a warm human body and they do not have feet designed to hold onto or walk on smooth surfaces like toilet seats.

How is a pubic lice infestation diagnosed?

A pubic lice infestation is diagnosed by finding a “crab” louse or egg (nit) on the hair in the pubic region or, less commonly, elsewhere on the body (eyebrows, eyelashes, beard, mustache, armpit, perianal area, groin, trunk or scalp). Pubic lice may be difficult to find because there may only be a few. Pubic lice often attach themselves to more than one hair and generally do not crawl as quickly as head or body lice. If crawling lice are

not seen, finding nits in the pubic area strongly suggests that a person is infested and should be treated.

If you are unsure about infestation, or if treatment is not successful, see a health care provider for a diagnosis. People infested with pubic lice should be investigated for the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases. Although pubic lice and nits can be large enough to be seen with the naked eye, a magnifying lens may be necessary to find lice or eggs.

Are there long-term complications of a pubic lice infestation?

No, pubic lice do not transmit disease; however, a secondary bacterial infection can occur from scratching of the skin.

How are pubic lice treated?

A lice killing lotion containing 1% permethrin or a mousse that contains pyrethrins and piperonyl butoxide can be used to treat pubic lice. These products are available over-the-counter without a prescription at a local drug store or pharmacy. These medications are safe and effective when used exactly according to the instructions in the package or on the label. Prescription shampoo medications are available but should not be used as a first-line therapy.

How to treat pubic lice infestations: (Warning: the lice medications described in this section should not be used near the eyes.)

1. Wash the infested area and towel dry.
2. Carefully follow the instructions in the package or on the label. Thoroughly saturate the pubic hair and other infested areas with lice medication. Leave medication on hair for the time recommended by the instructions. After waiting the recommended time, remove the medication by carefully following the instructions on the label or in the box.
3. Following treatment, most nits will still be attached to hair shafts. Nits may be removed with fingernails or by using a fine toothed comb.
4. Put on clean underwear and clothing after treatment.
5. To kill any lice or nits remaining on clothing, towels or bedding, machine wash and machine dry those items that the infested person used during the 2-3 days before treatment. Use hot water (at least 130° F) and the hot dryer cycle.
6. Items that cannot be laundered can be dry cleaned or stored in a sealed plastic bag for 2 weeks.
7. All sex partners from within the previous month should be informed that they are at risk for infestation and should be treated.
8. Persons should avoid sexual contact with their sex partner(s) until both they and their partners have been successfully treated and reevaluated to rule out a persistent infestation.
9. Repeat treatment in 9-10 days if live lice are still found.
10. Persons with pubic lice should be evaluated for other sexually transmitted diseases.

Special instructions for treatment of lice and nits found on eyebrows or eyelashes:

If only a few live lice and nits are present it may be possible to remove these with fingernails or a nit comb. If additional treatment is needed for lice or nits near the eyes consult with a physician for availability of prescription medications and instructions for their use. Regular petrolatum (Vaseline) should not be used

because it can irritate the eyes.

Who gets pubic lice?

Pubic lice are most commonly spread directly from person to person by sexual contact with a person who has pubic lice. Pubic lice are very rarely spread by clothing, bedding or a toilet seat.

How long can an infested person have pubic lice?

Without treatment, public lice can remain present as long as there are adult female lice that can feed on blood and lay nits which will develop into adult lice.

How common are pubic lice?

Pubic lice infestation is found worldwide and occurs in all races and ethnic groups and in all levels of society. Pubic lice are not a notifiable condition and may be successfully self- treated so the number of cases is unknown.

How can pubic lice be prevented?

Pubic lice can be prevented by not having sexual contact with a person who is infested. Since pubic lice can occasionally be spread by close personal contact or contact with articles such as clothing, bed linens and towels that have been used by an infested person, close contact and sharing of these items should be avoided. The following prevention measures should be followed:

- All sexual contacts of the infested person should be examined. All those who are infested should be treated.
- Sexual contact between infested person(s) and their partners(s) should be avoided until all have been examined, treated as necessary, and reevaluated to rule out persistent infestation.
- Machine wash and dry clothing worn and bedding used by the infested person in hot water (at least 130° F) laundry cycle and high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks.
- Do not share clothing, bedding or towels used by an infested person.
- Do not use fumigant sprays or fogs: they are not necessary to control pubic lice and can be toxic if inhaled or absorbed through the skin.

Are there any restrictions for people with pubic lice?

People who have pubic lice are not restricted from work or school but should refrain from sexual contact and sharing of bed linens, clothes, or towels with unaffected people.

Where can I get more information?

More information may be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/pubic>, your local health department, or your healthcare provider.

Sources:

American Academy of Pediatrics. Pediculosis Pubis (Pubic Lice, Crab Lice). In: Pickering LK, Baker CJ, Kimberlin DW, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2012 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2012: 547-548.

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