

Pubic Lice (Crabs)

What are public lice?

Pubic lice are parasites. Pubic lice are often referred to as crabs and are not to be confused with body lice. The scientific name for Pubic lice is *Pediculus pubis*. Pubic lice need blood to survive, but they can live up to 24 hours off a human body. Pubic lice have three very distinct phases; egg, nit (egg or young louse), and adult louse. The louse is the stage of the parasite that causes itching. Louse is the singular for lice (like mouse and mice).

How common are pubic lice?

In the United States, there are an estimated 3 million cases of pubic lice every year.

How do people get pubic lice?

Pubic lice are transmitted during skin-to-skin contact with an infected person. Even when there is no sexual penetration, an individual can get or give pubic lice. Pubic lice can be transmitted not only from sexual contact but also from non-sexual contact: from sleeping in an infested bed; using infested towels; or sharing infested underwear and clothes. Animals do not get or spread lice.

What are the signs or symptoms of pubic lice?

- The most common symptom of pubic lice is itching in the pubic area. The itching is caused by an allergic reaction to the bites, and usually starts about five days after a person gets pubic lice.
- If an individual has pubic lice s/he should look closely enough in the pubic area, and s/he may see small crab-like parasites that may be whitish-gray or rust colored.
- Lice eggs are small and oval-shaped. They are attached to the base of the hair (close to where it comes out of the body).
- A person may see "blue spots" for several days; these are the result of the bites.
- Pubic lice are usually found in the pubic area; however, they may be found in a person's armpits, eyelashes, and beard/mustache and sometimes in the hair on the head.

How are pubic lice diagnosed?

The adult pubic louse resembles a miniature crab which has six legs, but their two front legs are very large and look like the pincher claws of a crab; this is how they got the nickname "crabs". A person might need a magnifying glass to help identify them. If uncertain, a person should have a health care provider perform an examination. The health care provider may need to use a microscope.

What is the treatment for pubic lice?

There is a cream rinse, called Permethrin, which is applied to the affected area and washed off after 10 minutes. Another option is Lindane (also known as Kwell). This is a shampoo that is left on for four minutes then it's washed off. **Kwell (Lindane) should not be used after a bath; *should not be used by (a) persons with extensive dermatitis; (b) pregnant or lactating women; and, (c) children under 2 years.***

After cure, a person may still have some itching as a result of a skin irritation or allergic reaction. If so, s/he can use hydrocortisone cream. Also, all clothes, bed linens, sleeping bags, etc., will need to be washed in hot water (at least 125-degrees F.) and dried. Clothes and other items that cannot be washed can be placed in a plastic bag for two weeks. Treatment should be repeated in 7 to 10 days if lice are still found.

How can pubic lice be prevented?

- Abstinence (not having sex).
- Mutual monogamy (having sex with only one uninfected partner).

How can I reduce my risk of getting infected?

- Limit the number of sex partners to reduce risk of all STDs.
- People should use latex condoms for all types of sexual penetration (oral, vaginal, anal). Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of transmission of other STDs, but are not considered effective against pubic lice.
- Careful consideration and open communication between partners may protect all partners involved from infection.
- Have regular check-ups if you are sexually active.
- If an individual has an STD, s/he shouldn't have sex (oral, vaginal, or anal) until all partners have been treated.
- Prompt, qualified, and appropriate medical intervention and treatment and follow-up are important steps in breaking the disease cycle.

Why should I worry about having pubic lice?

A person may get a secondary infection as a result of scratching.

Should I tell my partner?

Yes. Telling a partner can be hard. It's important that a person talk to his/her partner as soon as possible so s/he can get treatment. Also, it is possible to pass pubic lice back and forth. If a person gets treated but his/her partner doesn't, the person could get infected again. Wash all clothes, sheets, towels, etc., in hot water (at least 125-degrees F.).

Should I tell my healthcare provider that I had pubic lice?

Yes. If an individual has one sexually transmitted disease, s/he may be at risk for other infections. A person should ask his/her doctor or nurse about being tested for other STDs.

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For more information about STDs, talk to your health care provider or call:

The State of Tennessee HIV/STD Hotline: 1-800-525-2437

(Monday through Friday 8:00 to 4:30 p.m. CST)

OR

The CDC National STD Hotline: 1-800-227-8922

Other Informational Links:

American Social Health Association

<http://www.ashastd.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/STD/>

E-Cards, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www2c.cdc.gov/ecards/index.asp?category=174>

Get Yourself Tested

<http://www.gytnow.org/>

National Institute of Health Medline

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sexuallytransmitteddiseases.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/sexually-transmitted-infections.cfm>

World Health Organization

http://www.who.int/topics/sexually_transmitted_infections/en/