

Pubic Lice Fact Sheet

1. **What are pubic lice?** - Also called "crabs," pubic lice are parasitic insects found in the genital area of humans. Infection is common and found worldwide.
2. **How do you get pubic lice?** - Pubic lice are usually spread through sexual contact. Rarely, infestation can be spread through contact with an infested person's bed linens, towels, or clothes. A common misunderstanding is that infestation can be spread by sitting on a toilet seat. This isn't likely, since lice cannot survive away from a warm human body. Also, lice do not have feet designed to walk or hold onto smooth surfaces such as toilet seats. Infection in a young child or teenager may indicate sexual activity or abuse.
3. **Where are pubic lice found?** - Pubic lice are generally found in the genital area on pubic hair, but may occasionally be found on other coarse body hair, such as hair on the legs, armpits, mustache, beard, eyebrows, or eyelashes. Infestations of young children are usually on the eyebrows or eyelashes. Lice found on the head are not pubic lice; they are head lice. Animals do not get or spread pubic lice.
4. **What are the signs and symptoms of pubic lice?** - Signs and symptoms include itching in the genital area and visible nits (lice eggs) or crawling lice. Pubic lice do not transmit disease but sores or secondary bacterial infections can occur from scratching of the skin.
5. **What do pubic lice look like?** - There are three stages in the life of a pubic louse: the nit, the nymph, and the adult.
 - a. Nits are pubic lice eggs. They are hard to see and are found firmly attached to the hair shaft. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Nits take about six to ten days to hatch.
 - b. The nit hatches into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult pubic louse, but is smaller. Nymphs mature into adults capable of reproducing about two to three weeks after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.
 - c. The adult pubic louse is 1.1 to 1.8 mm in length and resembles a miniature crab when viewed through a strong magnifying glass. Pubic lice have six legs, but 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. Females are usually larger than males. To live, adult lice must feed on blood. If the louse falls off a person, it dies within one to two days.
6. **How is a pubic lice infestation diagnosed?** - A lice infestation is diagnosed by looking closely through pubic hair for nits, nymphs, or adults. Occasionally, they may be found elsewhere on the body (eyebrows, eyelashes, beard, mustache, armpit, trunk, and scalp). It may be difficult to find a nymph or adult; there are usually few of them and they can move quickly away from light. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits confirms 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. Persons with pubic lice should be evaluated for the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases.

7. **How is a pubic lice infestation treated?**

- a. A lice-killing shampoo made of 1 percent permethrin or pyrethrin is used to treat pubic lice. These products are available without a prescription at your local drug store. Prescription medications are also available. Medication is generally very effective; apply the medication exactly as directed on the bottle. Most lice medications should not be used near the eyes, so read the package insert first.
- b. Following treatment, most nits will still be attached to hair shafts, but they may be removed with fingernails. Put on clean underwear and clothing after treatment. To kill any lice or nits that may be left on clothing or bedding, machine wash those washable items that the infested person used during the two to three days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle (130°F) and use the hot dryer cycle for at least 20 minutes. Dry-clean clothing that is not washable.
- c. Inform any sexual partners that they are at risk for infestation. Do not have sex until treatment is complete. Do not have sex with infected partners until partners have been treated and infestation has been cured.
- d. Repeat treatment in seven to ten days, if lice are still found.
- e. To treat nits and lice found on eyebrows or eyelashes:
 - (1) If only a few nits are found, it may be possible to remove live lice and nits with your fingernails or a nit comb.
 - (2) If additional treatment is needed for pubic lice nits found on the eyelashes, applying an ophthalmic-grade petrolatum ointment (available only by prescription) to the eyelids twice a day for ten days is effective. Petroleum jelly (e.g. Vaseline®) is likely to irritate the eyes if applied and should not be used.

8. **For more information about pubic lice:** <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/public/index.html>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information related to you or your child.