

## **Body Lice Fact Sheet**

1. **What are body lice?** - Body lice are parasitic insects that live on the body and in the clothing or bedding of infested humans. Infestation is common, found worldwide, and affects people of all races. Body lice infestations spread rapidly under crowded conditions where hygiene is poor and there is frequent contact among people.

2. **Are body lice infestations common in the United States?** - Body lice are found most commonly in homeless, transient populations who don't have access to changes of clothes or bath. Infestation is unlikely to persist on anyone who bathes regularly and who has at least weekly access to freshly laundered clothing and bedding.

3. **Where are body lice found?** - Body lice are found on the body and on clothing or bedding used by infested people; lice eggs are deposited in the seams of clothing or on bedding. Occasionally eggs are attached to body hair. Body lice generally live and lay eggs on clothing and only move to the skin to feed. Lice found on the hair and head are not body lice; they are head lice.

4. **Can body lice transmit disease?** - Yes. Epidemics of typhus and louse-borne relapsing fever have been caused by body lice. Though typhus is no longer widespread, epidemics still occur during times of war, civil unrest, natural disasters, in refugee camps, and prisons where people live crowded together in unsanitary conditions. Typhus still exists in places where climate, chronic poverty and social customs prevent regular changes and laundering of clothing.

5. **What are the signs and symptoms of body lice?** - Itching and rash are common; both are the body's allergic reaction to the lice bite. Long-term body lice infestations may lead to thickening and discoloration of the skin, particularly around the waist, groin, and upper thighs (sometimes called "vagabond's disease"). Sores on the body may be caused by scratching. These sores can sometimes become infected with bacteria or fungi.

6. **How are body lice spread?** - Body lice are spread directly through contact with a person who has body lice, or indirectly through shared clothing, beds, bed linens, or towels. Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play a role in transmission of human lice.

**7. What do body lice look like?** - There are three forms of body lice: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.

a. Nits are body lice eggs. They are generally easy to see in the seams of clothing, particularly around the waistline and under armpits. Nits may also be attached to body hair. They are oval and usually yellow to white. They may take 1-2 weeks to hatch.

b. A nymph is an immature louse that hatches from a nit. It looks like an adult body louse, but is smaller. Nymphs mature into adults about 9-12 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.

c. The adult body louse is about the size of a sesame seed (2.3-3.6mm in length), has six legs, and is tan to grayish-white. Female lice lay eggs. To live, adult lice need to feed on blood. If the louse falls off of a person, it dies within 5-7 days at room temperature.

**8. How is a body lice infestation diagnosed?** - By looking closely in the seams of clothing and on the body for eggs and for crawling lice. Nits and body lice may be large enough to be seen with the naked eye, but sometimes a magnifying glass is necessary. Diagnosis should be made by a health care provider if you are unsure about infestation.

**9. How are body lice treated?** - Lice infestations are generally treated by giving the infested person a clean change of clothes, a shower, and by laundering all worn clothing, bed linens, and towels. When laundering items, use the hot cycle (130°F) of the washing machine. Set the dryer to the hot cycle to dry items. Additionally, a 1.0% permethrin or pyrethrum lice shampoo may be applied to the body. Medication should be applied exactly as directed on the bottle or by your health care provider.

**10. For more information about Body Lice:**  
<http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/body/index.html>

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

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