

Pubic Lice (crabs)

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What are pubic lice?

Pubic lice (crabs) are tiny wingless insects that look like crabs when seen under a microscope. These white, tan or brownish insects are about 1-3 millimeters long. They are parasites that live primarily in the genital area on pubic hair but may occasionally be found on other coarse body hair, in the armpits, eyebrows and beard/mustache. Lice found on the scalp are not pubic lice; they are head lice. Lice feed by biting the skin and sucking blood. They lay oval yellow- white eggs called nits, which attach firmly at the base of the hair shaft. These hatch in about 8-10 days, producing more lice.

How do people get pubic lice?

- Pubic lice are usually spread through sexual contact
- Infestation can also be spread through contact with an infected person's bed linens, towels, or clothes.
- Lice cannot live long away from a warm human body
- Lice do not have feet designed to walk or hold onto smooth surfaces such as toilet seats.
- Animals do not get or spread pubic lice.

What are the signs and symptoms of pubic lice?

The most common symptom is itching in the genital area, which may worsen at night. At first, however, when you have only a few lice, you may have no symptoms. Finding an adult form may be difficult as they can move quickly away from light and their color allows them to blend easily against the skin.

You may notice nits in your pubic hair. They may look like dandruff, but unlike dandruff, they cannot be brushed away easily. Sometimes secondary bacterial infections occur from scratching, causing small pus-filled areas to develop around the hair shafts and surrounding areas.

How is pubic lice infestation diagnosed?

Although they are small, your medical provider will look closely through pubic hair for nits or adult lice.

How is it treated?

- Pubic lice and their eggs are not affected by ordinary soap and water.
- Your medical provider will recommend medication such as permethrin (eg. RID, NIX), or pyrethrin (Pronto, A-200).
- The medicine can be over the counter or prescription.
- You and your partner(s) should be treated at the same time.
- Housemates should consider being treated if there has been close physical contact or sharing of bedding, towels or clothes.
- *All sex partners from within the previous month should be informed they are at risk for infestation and should be treated.*
- Do not have sexual contact until your partner(s) are also treated and reevaluated to rule out persistent infection.
- Since public lice is a sexually transmitted infection (STI), you need to be tested for other STIs, such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis and HIV.

How do I use the treatment prescribed?

- Wash the infested area with regular shampoo; towel dry.
- Thoroughly saturate pubic hair and other coarse hairy areas such as thighs, underarms, and chest with lice medication. Do not use it in the vagina or rectum. If using permethrin or pyrethrin, leave medication on for 10 minutes.
- Thoroughly rinse off medication with water; dry off with a clean towel.
- Following treatment, remove nits using a fine-toothed nit comb or tweezers.
- Put on clean underwear and clothing after treatment.
- With some medicated shampoos, it is recommended that you repeat the treatment after 7-10 days. Others recommend re-treatment only if live lice are seen in 1 week. Check your medication label or with your medical provider.
- To kill any lice and nits that may be left on clothing and bedding, machine wash those washable items that the infested person used during the 3 days before treatment. Use the hot water wash cycle. Use the hot cycle of the dryer for at least 20 minutes to dry clothes and bedding.
- Dry clean or iron clothing that cannot be washed. Items that cannot be cleaned or washed can be sealed in a plastic bag for 2 weeks.
- Vacuum carpets and mattresses if possible. You may purchase a spray product to use on mattresses and upholstery.

The itch may persist for up to a week after successful treatment. If symptoms persist longer, see your medical provider.

If pubic lice have infested eyelashes or eyebrows, see your provider for a prescription ointment.