

Pubic lice

What are pubic lice?

Pubic lice (*Phthirus pubis*), also referred to as “crabs”, are small, flat parasitic insects that are crab-like in shape and light tan to grey in appearance. Pubic lice are mostly found in the pubic or genital area. They do not usually infect head hair, however they are sometimes found on coarse hair elsewhere on the body including eyebrows, eyelashes, beard, torso and armpits.

How does someone get pubic lice?

Pubic lice are usually spread through skin-to-skin contact during sex. Occasionally, they may spread by close contact with clothing, bed linens, or towels that have been used by someone with pubic lice. While pubic lice can be irritating, they cause no serious harm. However, it is always a good idea to get tested for other sexually transmissible infections (STIs) if you are engaging in skin to skin or unprotected sex. Although condoms are essential for safe sex, they do not provide protection against pubic lice.

What are the symptoms?

Not all people will have symptoms, so you may not know that you have pubic lice. However, the most common symptom of pubic lice is itchiness in the affected area. The itchiness is often worse at night-time when the lice are more active and feeding.

Other symptoms can include:

- visible lice
- visible nits (eggs) which appear as small light brown sacks and look like poppy seeds stuck to the base of the hair
- skin irritation and redness.

How are pubic lice diagnosed?

Pubic lice are diagnosed by inspecting the affected area. Nits are often easier to see than lice. If you are unsure if you have pubic lice, or if you have engaged in sex with someone who has pubic lice, see a healthcare provider for diagnosis and treatment.

What is the treatment?

Pubic lice can be treated by using a permethrin based topical cream or lotion on the affected areas. Depending on the level of infestation and amount of body hair, some creams and lotions

will need to be used on the entire body. It is important to use only creams or lotions as prescribed or advised by a medical professional or pharmacist, and always carefully read and follow the instructions on the label. The treatment does not work on unhatched eggs, so it will need to be repeated 1-2 weeks later to treat any new lice.

It is also important to wash and use a dryer (on the hottest cycle) or dry clean clothes, towels, and bedding to kill any remaining lice or nits. For further advice, see your doctor, pharmacist or sexual health centre.

What about sexual partner(s)?

If you have had sex with anyone within the past month, you should let them know so that they can be examined and treated for pubic lice. Current sexual partner(s) should be treated at the same time as you are.

How can I prevent pubic lice?

- avoid having sex until you and your partner(s) have been treated
- avoid sharing bedding or clothing with anyone who has pubic lice
- wash clothing, towels, and bedding and use a dryer (on the hottest cycle), following an infection.

References

Better Health Channel. *Pubic lice (crabs)*. Retrieved 29 November 2021, from <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/pubic-lice-crabs>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Pubic "Crab" Lice*. Retrieved 26 November 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/pubic/index.html>

Government of Western Australia Department of Health. *Pubic lice*. Retrieved 26 November 2021, from https://www.rph.health.wa.gov.au/Healthy-WA/Articles/N_R/Pubic-lice

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre. *Pubic lice treatment guidelines*. Retrieved 29 November 2021, from <https://www.mshc.org.au/health-professionals/treatment-guidelines/pubic-lice-treatment-guidelines>

Victorian Sexual Health Network. *Pubic lice*. Retrieved 26 November 2021, from <https://www.staystifree.org.au/get-the-facts/pubic-lice>

Accessibility

If you have difficulty reading a standard printed document and would like an alternative format, please phone 13 22 81.



If English is not your first language and you need the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS), please call 13 14 50.

For further accessibility information, visit: www.health.act.gov.au/accessibility

www.health.act.gov.au | Phone: 132281

© Australian Capital Territory, Canberra December 2021