

Pubic lice symptoms & treatment



FAST FACTS

- Pubic lice are tiny insects found on coarse human body hair, such as the hair around your genitals.
- They are passed on through close bodily contact with someone who has pubic lice and are usually sexually transmitted – which is when they move from one person to another during sex.
- Pubic lice cannot be prevented from spreading during sex – even by using condoms.
- A simple examination by a healthcare provider can easily tell if you have pubic lice.
- Pubic lice can be treated at home with insecticide cream, lotion or shampoo.

If you've had unprotected sex, or you're worried about pubic lice or other STIs, get tested as soon as possible – even if you don't have symptoms.

What are pubic lice?

Pubic lice, also known as crabs – are tiny parasitic insects that live on coarse human body hair, such as pubic hair (the hair around your genitals). They can also sometimes be found in other body hair such as underarm hair and beards, but don't live in the hair on your head. They are also called crabs because they have two large front legs that look like the claws of a crab.

Adult pubic lice and lice eggs are very small (2mm long) and can be seen in coarse hair. They are a yellow-grey or dusky red colour and have six legs. The lice lay their eggs (nits) in sacs that stick to

hair and are a pale brownish colour. When the eggs hatch, the empty egg sacs are white.

Pubic lice need human blood to survive, so will only leave the body to move from one person to another. They crawl from hair to hair, they can't fly or jump.

Are pubic lice serious?

Infestation is not usually serious, but it's important to get treatment to avoid minor complications such as an infection from scratching or eye irritation.

How do you get pubic lice?

Pubic lice can be passed on easily and you can get them if you:

- are in close contact with the body of someone who has pubic lice – most commonly sexual contact, including [vaginal](#), [anal](#) or [oral](#) sex.
- hug and kiss someone who has lice.
- share clothes, towels and bedding – although this is much less common.

Pubic lice, HIV and sexual health

- Pubic lice don't carry other diseases, and although they feed on blood, pubic lice cannot pass on HIV or other STIs.
- If you are taking antiretrovirals, it is important to discuss with your doctor how treatment for pubic lice may interact with your HIV drugs.

If you're worried about HIV infection, find out everything you need to know in our [HIV Transmission and Prevention section](#)

How do I protect myself against pubic lice?

- To prevent infestation, avoid having sexual or other close contact or sharing bedding or clothing with anyone who has lice.
- Using condoms and other methods of barrier contraception don't protect you.

Ask your doctor or healthcare worker for advice.

What do pubic lice symptoms look like?

It can be several weeks before any symptoms appear.

Symptoms for women and men include:

- itching – the most common symptom – and usually worse at night
- inflammation and irritation caused by scratching

- black powder in your underwear
- blue spots or small spots of blood on your skin, such as on your thighs or lower abdomen (caused by lice bites).

Can I get tested for pubic lice?

Yes - pubic lice are usually easy to diagnose. A healthcare professional will examine you and may use a magnifying glass to look for signs of the lice or their eggs.

If you have pubic lice, you should be tested for other STIs . The lice don't transmit HIV or other STIs, but a check-up is a good idea as a precaution. It's also important that you tell the people you live with, other people you have been in close bodily contact with and your recent sexual partner/s so that they can be checked and treated. This is important to stop the lice being passed on, and can stop you from getting them again.

How are pubic lice treated?

- Pubic lice can be treated at home with insecticide cream, lotion or shampoo without a prescription. A pharmacist can provide advice.
- Some treatments only need to be applied to the affected area, but sometimes the whole body must be treated, and treatment usually needs to be repeated after three to seven days.
- Certain groups, such as young people under 18 years of age and pregnant or breastfeeding women, may require a specific type of treatment. Your healthcare provider can advise on this.
- Wash all clothes, towels and bedding in hot water (50°C or higher) when you start treatment. If there are some things that you can't wash, put them in an airtight bag for three days.

Whether you can see the lice and their eggs or not, don't have sex or close body contact with other people until you and your current sexual partner/s have finished your treatment and have been checked to make sure the lice have gone.

Complications of pubic lice

Occasionally, a pubic lice infestation can lead to minor complications, such as skin or eye problems.

- Scratching can lead to an infection such as impetigo (a bacterial skin infection) or furunculosis (boils on the skin).
- Eye infections, such as conjunctivitis, and eye inflammation, such as blepharitis, can sometimes develop if your eyelashes have been infested with pubic lice.
- Untreated, long-standing infestations can cause you to feel generally unwell.



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Sources:

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