

STD/STI INFORMATIONAL FACT SHEET

PUBIC LICE (pyoo-bik lahys)

What is pubic lice (crabs)?

Pubic lice (also called crabs) exist when large numbers of crab-like parasites attach themselves to pubic hair or other coarse hair on the body (such as, armpits, eyelashes, and facial hair). *Phthirus pubis* is the scientific name for the parasite and Pediculus Pubis is the name for the condition. These parasites are not the same as those types found in the head or other parts of the body. Pubic lice have three definite phases of development. Phase one is the egg, or nit. Phase two is the nymph, or immature form of the adult; and, Phase three is the louse, or adult crab. A single female of the species lays about 50 eggs that attach to the base of a hair strand. The average life-span is 25-30 days, and the crabs need blood to survive. Off the human body, they can only live a day or so. Having pubic lice has nothing to do with an individual's personal hygiene. Anyone can get crabs under the right conditions.

How common is pubic lice?

In the U.S., there are about three million cases of pubic lice annually.

How is pubic lice transmitted?

Pubic lice are drawn to coarse body hair. The crabs do not attach to human head hair or to animal hair. The parasites are transmitted whenever an individual's body parts come into contact with another's body that is infested with pubic lice. Most cases of transmission occur during sexual contact as the crabs move from pubic hair to pubic hair. However, because the parasite can live a short time off the human body, it is possible to get crabs when there is no penetration or when there is contact with infested bedding, towels, clothing, or upholstered furniture.

What are the signs and symptoms of pubic lice?

The most common symptom of pubic lice is itching in the genital area that generally starts about five days after contact. Infected individuals also may experience a slight fever, irritability, or a tired, run-down feeling. Signs that an individual is infested are nits and crabs that can be visually observed. The nits, attached to the base of hair strands, are small, oval shape, and whitish in appearance. The lice or crabs may be a whitish-gray, light brown, or rust color. Both can be seen by looking closely or using a magnifying glass. Other signs that may indicate pubic lice are dark specks on underwear, which are crab feces; and dark, bluish spots on the skin that result from lice bites.

What are complications of pubic lice?

There are no severe medical consequences from having pubic lice. However, having pubic lice raises suspicion of other STDs. Individuals with crabs should be aware that scratching irritated skin may lead to secondary infections that result from the skin breakdown.

How do pubic lice affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

During pregnancy, there are no serious effects associated with pubic lice infection for a mother or her baby. Even so, the woman should tell health care providers that she is pregnant when seeking treatment. There are some medications (shampoos or creams) that should not be used during pregnancy or while breast feeding. They could be dangerous to the unborn or newborn.

How is pubic lice diagnosed?

Pubic lice can be self-diagnosed or diagnosed by a health care provider through a visual examination. A microscope or magnifying glass might be more helpful in the diagnosis. The crab may start as a pale grey color and darken when it is swollen with blood. Brown specks on the underwear or bruised skin from scratching may help diagnose pubic lice also. Blood tests and other laboratory tests are not useful in diagnosing crabs.

What is the treatment for pubic lice?

There are many over-the-counter and prescription medications and shampoos to cure pubic lice. It is unnecessary to shave pubic hair to remove crabs. Individuals, however, must seek treatment; the parasites will not go away without treatment. It is important to carefully follow directions for use of the creams and shampoos to disinfect the body. In addition to using creams and shampoos, individuals with crabs need to wash clothing, bedding, and towels in very hot water and dry them on the hot cycle for minimally 20 minutes; dry clean items that cannot be washed; and freeze items up to two weeks that cannot be washed or dry cleaned (like toys or blankets). Before putting items in the freezer, they should be placed inside a plastic bag. To be especially careful, individuals may choose to vacuum rugs and furniture while treating household items with bug sprays having active agents against crabs. Infected individuals also should abstain from sexual intercourse while undergoing treatment. If a woman is pregnant or breast feeding, a health care provider should be consulted. There are some medications known to be unsafe for women, the fetus, and children in these situations.

While treating for pubic lice, the nits (or eggs) also need to be treated. Nits can be removed with a fine-tooth comb, tweezers, or fingernails. Afterward, the comb and tweezers should be thrown away. It also is important to cut and clean under nails to remove traces of nits or crabs. In most cases, lice and nits can be destroyed with a single treatment. If the first treatment does not work, however, a

second treatment should be applied a week later. If problems still exist, a health care provider should be contacted for assistance.

How can pubic lice be prevented?

There are no vaccines or skin treatments to protect against pubic lice. The best way to avoid infestation is to remain abstinent. For those who are sexually active, it is important that both partners are mutually monogamous and uninfected. Latex condoms do not protect against pubic lice because they do not cover the pubic hair. Pubic lice are highly contagious, if only one partner is treated, crabs can be transmitted again. If a person is infested with the parasites, it is important to talk with the partner so that both can be treated simultaneously to avoid future infection. It is important to get prompt treatment, as stated in the previous section, to prevent subsequent infections.

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For information about specific STDs/STIs, below are sources to use:

Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI)

120 Wall Street, 21st Floor
New York, NY 10005
Phone: 212/248-1111
Fax: 212/248-1951
<http://www.agi-usa.org>

American Social Health Association (ASHA)

P. O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-
3827
Phone: 800-783-9877
<http://www.ashastd.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

– Sexually Transmitted
Disease - STD information and
referrals to STD Clinics
CDC-INFO
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-
4636); TTY: 888-232-6348 In English,
en Espanol
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm>

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)

P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
Phone: 800-458-5231;
Fax: 888-282-7681
1-800-243-7012 TTY
E-mail: info@cdcnpin.org

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

2400 Sand Hill Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025
Phone: 650/854-9400
Fax: 650/854-4800
<http://www.kff.org>

National Herpes Hotline (NHH)

Open from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., ET,
Monday - Friday.
Phone: 919/361-8488

National HPV and Cervical Cancer Prevention Hotline

Open from 2 P.M. to 7 P.M., ET,
Monday - Friday.
Phone: 919/361-4848

**Planned Parenthood Federation
of America**

434 West 33rd St.
New York, NY 10001
212/541-7800
FAX: 212/245-1845
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

Virginia Department of Health

109 Governor Street
Richmond, VA 23219
VIRGINIA STD/AIDS HOTLINE
Phone: 800-533-4148
<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/DiseasePrevention/factsheets.htm>

**Sexuality Information and
Education Council of the United
States (SIECUS)**

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350
New York, New York 10036-7802
Phone: 212/819-9770
Fax: 212/819-9776
<http://www.siecus.org>