

Pubic lice (crabs)

Pubic lice, or crab lice, infest pubic hair. They can also sometimes affect the hair of the armpit, eyebrows, eyelashes, beard and torso. The infection is also called pediculosis pubis and the lice are called *Phthirus pubis*.

Pubic lice are small, flat, light-brown parasites that cling to pubic hair and suck blood for nourishment. Blood sucking from pubic lice can cause small red areas or sores and itching. Pubic lice are usually sexually transmitted through direct skin-to-skin contact, including sexual activity. However, they can also be spread by contact with towels, undergarments and bedding of an infected person.

Lice infestation causes no serious harm, but can be irritating. If you have pubic lice, it is a good idea to get tested for other sexually transmissible infections.

Symptoms

The main symptom is itching of the affected area. This is often worse at night. Lice and nits (eggs from the lice) can sometimes be seen, especially stuck to the pubic hairs. Some people have no symptoms and may be unaware of the lice infestation.

Diagnosis

Pubic lice are diagnosed by careful inspection of the affected area.

Treatment

Topical creams or lotions containing permethrin (for example, Lyclear cream or Quellada lotion) and applied to the affected area are the most commonly recommended treatment. See your doctor, pharmacist or sexual health centre for further advice.

Permethrin should not be applied to the eyelashes. If this area is affected, discuss an alternative treatment such as petroleum jelly with your doctor.

Treatment tips

Treatment for public lice will be more effective if a few simple guidelines are followed:

- Usually the whole body from neck to toes should be treated, including the perineum (the skin between the vagina and the anus) and the anal area.
- Read and follow the instructions on the medication carefully.
- The skin should be cool, clean and dry when the cream is applied.
- Apply the cream and leave it on overnight. It can be washed off the next morning. You don't need to apply the cream to head hair.
- Wash clothing, towels and bedding at the same time as treatment (hot machine washing and drying is sufficient).
- The treatment should be repeated after one to two weeks as it is not effective against unhatched eggs. Eggs hatch in 6–10 days.
- Avoid close personal contact until you and your contacts or partner are treated.

Symptoms may take a few days to settle. If you still have symptoms one week after treatment, you should see your doctor for review.

Sexual partners should be treated

Any sexual partners you have had over the last month will need to be examined and treated. Current sexual partners should be treated at the same time that you are. Condoms do not protect you against pubic lice.

Where to get help

- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619Your doctor
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- Pubic lice are usually sexually transmitted through direct skin-to-skin contact.
- Pubic lice do not voluntarily leave the body and will need to be treated with a cream or lotion that contains permethrin.
- Do not use insecticides used in the home as these will not work and can damage the skin.
- Lice infestation causes no serious harm, but it is advisable to be tested for other sexually transmissible infections.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2011 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.