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Pubic Lice (Crabs)

Parasitic Insects Found in the Genital Area of Humans

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Pubic lice are generally found in the genital area on pubic hair.

Also called "Crabs" pubic lice are parasitic insects generally found in the genital area of humans but may occasionally be found on other coarse body hair, such as hair on the legs or armpit. Lice found on the head, in areas like the moustache, beard, eyebrows, eyelashes and scalp hair are not pubic lice, they are head lice. Animals do not get or spread pubic lice. Infection is common and found worldwide.

Pubic lice have six legs, but their two front legs are very large and look like the claws of a crab which is why they got the nickname "crabs".

There are three stages in the life of a pubic louse; the nit, the nymph, and the adult.

Nits are pubic lice eggs. They are hard to see and are found firmly attached to the hair shaft. They are oval and usually yellow to white in colour. Nits take about one week to hatch into a baby louse called a nymph. It looks like an adult pubic louse only smaller.

Nymphs mature into adults about seven days after hatching and survive by feeding on blood.

The adult pubic louse resembles a miniature crab when viewed through a strong magnifying glass. They have six legs, but their two front legs are very large and look like the claws of a crab. Pubic lice are tan to greyish-white in colour with females usually larger than males. To survive, adult lice need to feed on blood and will die within about two days if it becomes separated from the host.

Pubic lice infestations are diagnosed by looking closely through pubic hair for nits, nymphs, or adults. Finding a nymph or adult may be difficult, they can move quickly away from the light. If crawling lice are not seen, finding nits confirms that a person is infested and should be treated. Diagnosis should be made by a health care provider.

Pubic lice are usually spread through sexual contact. Rarely will infestation be spread through contact with an infested person's bed linen, towels or clothes. A common misbelief is that infestation can be spread by sitting on a toilet seat. This isn't likely, since pubic lice cannot live long away from a warm human body. Also, lice do not have feet designed to walk or hold onto smooth surfaces.

Pubic lice are treated by a 1% permethrin or pyrethrin lice shampoo, also called pediculicide. To treat pubic lice infestations successfully, follow these steps: (medications described in this section should not be used near the eyes)

1. Wash the infested area; towel dry
2. Thoroughly saturate hair with lice medication. If using permethrin or pyrethrins, leave medication on for ten minutes; if using Lindane, shampoo should only be left on for four minutes. Thoroughly rinse off medication with water.
3. Dry off with a clean towel.
4. Following treatment, most nits will still be attached to hair shafts. Nits may be removed with fingernails
5. Put on clean underwear and clothing after treatment.
6. To kill any nits and lice that may be left on clothing or bedding, machine wash those items during the two to three days before treatment. Use the hot water cycle (at least 130 degrees Fahrenheit) of the washing machine to wash clothes. Use the hot cycle of the dryer for at least twenty minutes to dry clothes.
7. Dry-clean clothing that are not machine-washable.
8. Inform any sexual partners that they are at risk of infestation.
9. Avoid any sexual activity until partners have been treated and infestation has been cured.
10. Repeat in seven to ten days if lice are still found.

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