

Pubic lice

What are pubic lice?

Pubic lice are small insects that live in coarse body hair, usually in the pubic area. They are also called crabs or crab lice. They may also be found in chest hair, armpit hair, on the upper thighs, lower abdomen, eyebrows, eyelashes and facial hair.

How are they spread?

Pubic lice cannot jump or fly. They spread through close physical or sexual contact and may also spread by sharing clothing, bedding or towels with someone who has pubic lice.

Avoid close contact and sharing personal items like clothes or towels with someone who has pubic lice.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is itching.

The edges of your eyelids may be crusted, if pubic lice get on your eyelashes. You may see lice and their eggs at the base of the eyelashes.

The bites may also become infected, causing irritation and painful swelling. Bites from the lice can cause a rash or small bluish spots on your skin. The blue spots may remain for a while, even after treatment. Small black spots or tiny blood stains may be visible in underwear, clothing or bedding.

You will also likely see tiny, tan-coloured specks on your pubic hair that cannot be pulled off. These specks are the eggs laid by the lice called nits.

What is the treatment?

Pubic lice will not go away without treatment. Treatments include using a special lotion or shampoo to kill the lice and their eggs. These are available without a prescription. Follow the instructions carefully.

If lice are on your eyebrows or eyelashes, do not use shampoos or lotions. If there are only a few nits and lice, remove with fingernails, tweezers or nit comb. If there are many nits and lice, apply an over-the-counter pharmaceutical grade ophthalmic ointment to the eyelid margins and eyebrows twice a day for 10 days. This loosens the lice and nits so that you can remove them with your fingers.

Do not use regular petroleum jelly (for example, Vaseline®) as it may irritate the eyes. Speak with your health care provider or pharmacist for more information.

Your sexual partner should also be treated. Others in your home do not need treatment unless they shared your clothes, bed or towels.

If lice remain after the first treatment or you notice signs of a skin infection, contact your health care provider. Skin infections can be caused by frequent scratching.

What should I do with my clothes, bed sheets and towels?

Wash all clothes, bed sheets, towels and cloth toys that may have come into contact with lice with hot water or dry-clean them. Use a washing machine with water hotter than 50°C (122°F) or place items in a hot dryer for at least 30 minutes.

Items that cannot be washed in hot water or dry-cleaned should be sealed in an airtight plastic bag for 7 days to kill the lice.

How can I reduce my chance of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

These are some steps you can take to reduce your chances of getting an STI:

- Stay informed: Understand different STIs, how to prevent them and which sexual activities are likely to pass them
- Get tested: Get tested regularly with your partner(s) for STIs so you know and can act as soon as possible
- Have safer sex: Use condoms, barriers or lube to make sex safer

- Get vaccinated: Vaccines are available to prevent some infections, including HPV, hepatitis A and hepatitis B
- Talk to your partner(s): Discuss consent, safer sex, sexual activities and preferences, and STI testing. Communication can help protect the health of you and your partners, and help you have positive sexual relationships and experiences

For more information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, visit [HealthLinkBC File #08o Preventing sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#).