



# Pubic Lice

(PYOO-bik LYCE)

## What are pubic lice?

Pubic lice, some times called crab lice or "crabs" are parasitic insects found primarily in the pubic or genital area of humans.

## How can a person get pubic lice?

Pubic lice usually are spread through sexual contact and are most common in adults. Occasionally, pubic lice may be spread by close personal contact or contact with articles such as clothing, bed linens, or towels that have been used by an infested person. Pubic lice cannot live away from a warm human body for long. Pubic lice cannot be spread by sitting on a toilet seat. Persons infested with pubic lice should be examined for the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases.

## Who can get pubic lice?

Anyone who is sexually active can get pubic lice. Pubic lice are found worldwide and occur in all races, ethnic groups, and levels of society.

## What do pubic lice look like?

Pubic lice have three forms: the egg (also called a nit), the nymph, and the adult.

- **Nit:** Nits are **pubic lice eggs**. They can be hard to see and are found firmly attached to body hair such as pubic hairs. They are oval and usually yellow to white. Pubic lice nits take about 6-10 days to hatch.
- **Nymph:** Nymphs are **immature pubic lice** that hatch from the nits (eggs). Nymphs looks like an adult pubic lice but they are smaller in size. Pubic lice nymphs take about 2-3 weeks after hatching to mature into adults capable of reproducing. Nymphs survive on blood by biting.
- **Adult:** Adult pubic lice are **tan to grayish-white in color** and look like miniature crabs. Pubic lice have six legs; the two front legs are very large and look like the pincher claws of a crab. Females lay nits and are usually larger than males. Pubic lice must feed on blood to survive. If pubic lice fall off a person, it dies within 1-2 days.

## Where do pubic lice live?

Pubic lice usually are found in the genital area on pubic hair. They may some times found on other coarse body hair, such as hair on the legs, armpits, mustache, beard, eyebrows, or eyelashes. Lice found on the head are head lice, not pubic lice. Animals cannot get or spread pubic lice.

## What are the symptoms of pubic lice?

Signs and symptoms of pubic lice include

- Itching in the genital area
- Visible nits (lice eggs) or crawling lice

### **How can I find out if I have pubic lice?**

Adult or nymph pubic lice can be seen and often attach themselves to more than one hair and generally do not crawl as quickly as head and body lice. If crawling lice are not seen, pubic lice nits or eggs found in the pubic area suggest that a person is infected and should be treated. Pubic lice and nits can be large enough to be seen with the naked eye, a magnifying lens may be necessary to find lice or eggs.

If you are unsure whether you have pubic lice, see a health care provider for a physical exam. Persons infested with pubic lice should be evaluated for the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases.

### **Can pubic lice be treated?**

Yes, using special shampoos and creams can get rid of pubic lice. Check with your local drugstore to see if these products are available. Make sure your partner also gets treated at the same time to prevent yourself from getting scabies or pubic lice again. For more details on how to treat pubic lice, visit the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/pubic/treatment.html>

### **Where can I get tested?**

Most health care providers offer testing for Chlamydia and other STIs. To find a health care center in a neighborhood near you, call the Mayor's Health Line at **617-534-5050 and Toll-Free: 1-800-847-0710** or visit <http://www.hivtest.org/STDTesting.aspx> and enter your zip code.

### **How can you protect yourself from getting pubic lice and other STIs?**

The only 100% effective way to prevent pubic lice is to not have sex.

If you do have sex, you can limit your risk by taking the following steps:

- Always use a latex or polyurethane condom or barrier (dental dam) when having anal, vaginal and/or oral sex
  - Condoms made from "natural" materials may protect against pregnancy but NOT STIs
- Reduce your number of partners if you choose to have sex
- Talk with your partner about their STI status and getting tested
- Talk with your health care provider about sex safety and getting tested
- Understand that having sex while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol can increase the likelihood of unprotected sex
- Contact your health care provider if you experience any symptoms



**For more information contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
Infectious Disease Bureau  
617-534-5611 or [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)**