

Pubic lice (crabs)

Pubic lice are tiny parasitic insects which live in coarse body hair. They are yellow-grey and about 2mm long. They can be found in pubic hair and underarm hair, on hairy legs, abdomens and chests, eyelashes and occasionally in eyebrows and beards.

Signs and symptoms

These are the same for both men and women:

- itching in the infected areas
- black powder in underwear caused by droppings from the lice
- brown eggs (nits) on pubic or other hair
- it is sometimes possible to see the lice on the skin.

Pubic lice cannot travel up into the hair on the head (although you can also have head lice). Pubic lice travel by crawling from hair to hair; they cannot fly or jump.

How pubic lice are passed on

Pubic lice are usually sexually transmitted. However, they can be transferred just by close physical contact with someone who has them.

In some cases pubic lice can be transferred by sharing sheets and towels.

Where to go for help

- Your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic.

You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD). Or phone your local hospital and ask for the 'special' or

GUM clinic. Or check our Lovelife web site (www.lovelife.uk.com) for a directory of GUM clinics in the UK.

You will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to any NHS clinic anywhere in the country – you don't have to go to a local one – and you don't have to be referred by your GP. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics may not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.)

- Your own GP
- Your pharmacist, who can sell you a treatment over the counter

Diagnosis and treatment

- A doctor can diagnose pubic lice by giving you a physical examination and by taking your medical history.
- Pubic lice may be taken from the skin and examined under a microscope.

Pubic lice are easily treated using a special shampoo or lotion.

Clothing and bedding should be washed to avoid reinfection. Even after successful treatment, itching may continue for a few weeks. The doctor can prescribe tablets or lotions to help with this.

Your sexual partner should also be checked and treated. Until treatment is completed, you can pass on pubic lice. The doctor is

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likely to advise you to avoid having sexual contact with anyone during treatment.

Follow-up

It is advisable to return for a check-up following treatment. This is usually in one week's time.

It is possible to have more than one sexually transmitted infection at the same time. For this reason a full check-up is always recommended.

NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics routinely test for a number of sexually transmitted infections.

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

Alternatively, free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).



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Chlamydia