

Pubic lice / crabs - Patient information leaflet

Key points

Pubic lice / crabs are a sexually transmitted infection
They are passed from one person to another during sex and / or by close body contact
Treatment is simple

What are pubic lice / crabs?

- ❖ Pubic lice / crabs are a sexually transmitted infection. It is caused by the crab louse *Phthirus pubis*

How do you get pubic lice / crabs?

- ❖ You can catch pubic lice / crabs when you have sex or close bodily contact with someone who already has the infection.
- ❖ The infection is more common in young people, and people who frequently change sexual partners.
- ❖ Even if you have had pubic lice / crabs before, you can still catch it again.

What are the symptoms of pubic lice / crabs?

- ❖ You may notice the nits (eggs) or lice (adults) attached to hairs: these may be the hairs of the pubic and perianal areas; those of the legs, forearms, chest; and rarely the eyelashes, eyebrows, armpit hair and beard.
- ❖ They can cause itchy red lumps in the surrounding skin
- ❖ You may see small blue patches on your lower abdomen and thighs

Do I need any tests?

- ❖ No, usually it is possible to make the diagnosis just by examining you (sometimes using a magnifying glass).
- ❖ Sometimes if it is not certain what the problem is, hairs can be looked at under a microscope to see if nits or lice are present.
- ❖ If you think you have been in contact with pubic lice / crabs, or other infections, or have symptoms that could be pubic lice / crabs you should visit your family doctor or local sexual health or venereology/dermatology clinic.
- ❖ If you have pubic lice / crabs, you should also be tested for other sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia, as you can have more than one infection at the same time.

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What is the treatment for pubic lice / crabs?

- ❖ Pubic lice / crabs are treated with a lotion which should be applied to all the hairy parts of the body from the neck down. This needs to be left on for a different amount of time depending on which lotion is used, and may need to be repeated after one week.
- ❖ Sometimes you may be treated with a tablet, which may need to be repeated after one week.
- ❖ You need to wash your clothes and bedding at a temperature of at least 50°C to kill the lice and nits. Alternately they can be dry-cleaned or sealed and stored in a plastic bag for 3 days.
- ❖ If you have lice on your eyelashes you can use a petroleum jelly eye patch, twice a day for 8 to 10 days, or remove the lice with tweezers.

Should I have sex if I have pubic lice / crabs?

- ❖ You should avoid any close contact until you and your partner have both been treated and your symptoms have gone.

What are the possible complications of pubic lice / crabs?

- ❖ Pubic lice / crabs will not cause any long-term problems
- ❖ Sometimes the lice may not respond to the treatment you are given first time and need a different treatment.
- ❖ You may see dead nits (eggs) on your hairs for some weeks. They do not need to be removed or need any further treatment.

Pubic lice / crabs and pregnancy

- ❖ There is no risk to your pregnancy or baby.

Do I need to tell my partner?

- ❖ If you do have pubic lice / crabs, it is advisable that your current sexual partner, and any other sexual partner you have had over the last month, is examined and treated. This is to stop you getting the infection again.

Further help and information

- ❖ If you suspect that you have pubic lice / crabs or any other sexually transmitted infection, then see your family doctor or local sexual health or venereology/dermatology clinic.