



What are lice?

Lice are tiny insects that live on humans and survive by feeding on blood. When a large number of lice live and reproduce on a person, it is called an infestation.

Three different kinds of lice infest humans:

Head lice: are usually found in hair, most often on the nape of the neck and behind the ears. Head lice infestation (pediculosis) is common in preschool and elementary school-age children. Adults can be affected, especially if they live in a household with children.

Pubic lice: ("crabs") are usually found in the pubic area but may also be found on facial hair, on eyelashes, on eyebrows, in the armpits, on chest hair, and, rarely, on the scalp.

Body Lice: live and lay eggs in the seams of clothing. The lice are only present on the body when they feed. Under certain conditions, such as may occur during natural disasters or war, body lice may transmit life-threatening diseases such as typhus, relapsing fever, and trench fever.

What causes lice infestation?

Lice are spread easily from one person to another through close bodily contact or through shared clothing or personal items (such as hats or hair brushes). They cannot jump or fly.

What are the symptoms of lice infestations?

The most common symptom of lice infestation (pediculosis) is itching in the affected areas. Symptoms vary depending on which type of lice is present.

Head lice: may not cause any symptoms early in the infestation. Itching on the scalp may develop weeks or even months after lice have infested the person. Scratching infested areas can make the skin raw. The raw skin may weep clear fluid or crust over, and it may become infected.

Pubic lice: cause severe itching or affected areas. Their bites may cause small bruise-like marks (maculae cerulea) on the torso, thighs, or upper arms. Pubic lice most often affect the genitals, but they may also appear in the areas around the anus and armpits, in body and facial hair, and on the eyelashes. If pubic lice infest the eyelashes, the edges of the eyelids may be crusted, and lice and their eggs (nits) may be seen at the base of the eyelashes.

Body lice: cause intense itching, especially at night. Itchy sores appear in the armpits and on the waist, trunk, and other areas where seams of clothes press against the skin. The lice and eggs (nits) may be found in the seams of the person's clothing but are generally not seen on the skin.

Lice will not go away without proper treatment. In the meantime, they can be spread to other household members, sexual partners, or other people you may have close personal contact with. If you think you have lice, try a nonprescription product or call a health professional.

How is lice infestation diagnosed?

A close visual examination, for live lice or nits in the hair is usually all that is needed to diagnose an infestation of head lice. A health professional may examine the lice or nits under a microscope to confirm the diagnosis.

Pubic lice and body lice can also be diagnosed with a close visual examination of the affected areas or the person's clothing.

How is it treated?

Lice and their eggs (nits) must be destroyed to get rid of an infestation. The most common treatment is a topical nonprescription or prescription cream, lotion, or shampoo to kill the lice and eggs. Sometimes a second treatment is needed to make sure that all the eggs are destroyed. When two or more topical treatments have failed to get rid of the lice, a prescription pill called ivermectin can be taken.

A new type of hair sealant that kills head lice by suffocating them is currently under medical review.

Some people have a lingering allergic reaction to lice bites that causes itching for 7 to 10 days after the lice and nits have been destroyed. Corticosteroid creams or calamine lotion may be used to relieve the itching. In the case of severe itching, oral antihistamines may be used.

Frequent scratching can cause a skin infection. In the most severe cases of head lice, hair may fall out, and the skin may darken in the areas infested with lice.

Treatment Plan:

- Use medical shampoo as directed.
- Machine wash all linens, stuffed animals, or any other items with which the lice may have come in contact. Wash in hot, soapy water. Dry all linens in a hot dryer for at least 30 minutes.
- Items that can not be washed must be taken to the dry cleaner or wrapped and sealed in a plastic bag for 14 days.
- Clean all hair accessories well.
- Vacuum all furniture
- After shampooing as directed, make sure to remove each single nit from each shaft of hair. Any nits left in the hair will hatch and start the cycle over again.

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