



Lice (Pediculosis) Fact Sheet

What is "lice"?

Lice are small insects that live in the hairy parts of the body. The eggs (nits), larvae, or adult lice can be found. The crawling stages of this insect feed on human blood by biting which can result in severe itching. Head lice are found on the scalp, crab lice in the pubic (genital) area, and body lice in clothing along inside seams that touch the body.

Who gets lice?

Anyone may get lice under the right conditions. Lice spread easily from person to person after close contact. Head lice may be found on people in schools or nursing homes. Crab lice may be found on sexually active people. Body lice may be found in people living in crowded, dirty conditions where clothing is not often changed or washed.

How are lice spread?

Spread of both head lice and body lice can happen during close contact with a person who has lice. Sharing of clothing and combs or brushes may also result in the spread of these insects. Crab lice spread through sexual contact.

What are the symptoms of lice?

Usually, the first sign is itching or scratching in the area of the body where the lice feed. Itching at the back of the head or around the ears may result from the presence of head lice and nits in the hair. Itching around the genital area should lead to an examination for crab lice or their eggs. Scratching can be severe enough to result in bacterial infections in these areas.

How soon do symptoms appear?

It may take 2 to 3 weeks or longer for a person to notice the extreme itching associated with lice.

How long is a person able to spread lice?

Lice can spread as long as the insects or their eggs remain alive on the infested person or on clothing.

What is the treatment for lice?

Medicated shampoos are used to kill lice. They are available from a doctor or over-the-counter. Some shampoos are not recommended for infants, young children, and women who are pregnant or breast-feeding. Always follow the directions on the label of the shampoo. Special combs are available to help remove nits from hair. At the same time, wash clothing, sheets, blankets, and bedspreads in hot water to destroy lice and eggs. The shampoo should be used again after 7 to 10 days to make sure that any lice who hatched after the first treatment are killed.

What can be done to prevent the spread of lice?

Avoid physical contact with persons with lice. Do not share clothing, hats, combs or brushes, or bedding. Wash clothing, sheets, blankets, and bedspreads in hot water to destroy lice and eggs. Check children regularly for head lice. Use the proper medicated shampoos for treatment of lice.

For further information, contact the Oklahoma City-County Health Department

(405) 425-4347

revised 04/2013

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