



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Pediculosis

Crab Lice

What are crab lice?

Crab lice are parasitic insects that feed on human blood and cause severe itching. The lice that are found in pubic hairs, *Phthirus pubis*, are also commonly called “crabs.” Pediculosis is the general term used for infestation of the body or hair with adult lice, larvae, and nits (eggs).

How do you get it?

You usually get crab lice through sexual contact. In rare cases, crab lice may also be spread to another person through contaminated items such as towels.

What are the symptoms of crab lice?

The major symptom of crab lice is itching or scratching of the body in the pubic region. Other areas of the body may be infested, particularly the eyelashes, eyebrows, and armpits.

When do symptoms start?

It can take several weeks for a person to become symptomatic after infestation with crab lice.

For how long is a person contagious for head lice?

As long as lice or nits are still found on a person or their clothing, the lice can be spread to others.

What is the treatment for crab lice?

Medicated shampoos and cream rinses are used to kill lice and their nits. The treatment may need to be applied twice, with a 7-day interval separating the applications. This assures that all the nits that survived the first application are killed on second application. For crab lice infestation of the eyelashes, petroleum ointment should be applied 3 to 4 times a day for 10 days.

If you get crab lice once, can you get it again?

Yes.

How do you keep from getting it?

Avoid sexual activity with an infested person until treatment is completed.

Do not share clothing, sheets or other linens belonging to a person with crab lice.

Wash clothing, towels and bedding in detergent and hot water (at least 130°F for 5 minutes) or dry clean to kill lice and nits. This should be done at the same time that you treat for crab lice with medicated shampoo or cream.

All sexual contacts of persons with crab lice should be examined and treated by a qualified health professional.