

Crabs or pubic lice are transmitted through close physical or sexual contact. They are easy to treat with a lotion.

Crabs / Pubic Lice

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What are crabs/ pubic lice?

Crabs are small insects called lice that grip onto the hair in the genital area. They are shaped like tiny crabs. They usually live in pubic hair, but can also be found in chest hair, armpit hair, beards and eyelashes. Pubic lice are not the same as head lice.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is itching in the pubic hair.

How is it transmitted?

Crabs are transmitted by close body contact, usually sexual, with a person who has them. It is also possible to catch crabs through sharing towels or clothes, or sleeping in an infected person's bed. Crabs show up between three days to several weeks after exposure.

How is it prevented?

It is hard to prevent transmission of crabs because they are easy to catch from close body contact.

Go for a regular sexually transmissible infection (STI) check-up to find infections before complications develop and to prevent transmission to others. Always use condoms.

Using condoms and water based lubricant can significantly reduce the risk of other sexually transmissible infections.

How is it diagnosed?

Crabs can be identified by checking the pubic hair closely, in a good light. You will be able to see the tiny lice clinging to the pubic hair, and there may also be eggs stuck to the hair which look like tiny white specks.

How is it treated?

Crabs can be treated quickly and easily by using a special lotion. Your doctor or pharmacist can suggest which lotion to use – you do not need a prescription. Follow the instructions carefully. Treatment is usually repeated after 7 days. Shaving does not work as it usually fails to get rid of all the lice or eggs.

Wash any clothing and linen that you have been in direct contact with, and make sure any sexual partner is treated at the same time. Housemates also need to consider treatment if they have slept in the same bed, or shared towels or clothing with you.

If you do not treat crabs the itching will continue and the crabs may spread further.

Telling partners

If you have crabs it is important to tell your sexual partner so they can be treated. You may have to tell housemates who have shared clothing or linen with you. Your doctor can help you decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them.

The information in this fact sheet is general and you should see a doctor if you are worried about your health.

Contact

NSW Sexual Health Infoline freecall **1800 451 624**.