

# Pubic lice and Scabies

Looking after **your** sexual health

# Pubic lice and Scabies

**Pubic lice** are tiny parasitic insects that live in coarse body hair, such as pubic hair. They're yellow-grey, about 2mm long and have six legs. They're often known as crabs. Their eggs appear as brownish dots fixed to coarse body hair. Pubic lice are different from head lice and aren't found in the hair on your scalp.

**Scabies** is caused by tiny parasitic mites. They're smaller than a pinhead and burrow into the skin and lay eggs. A more severe and uncommon form of the condition occurs when there are many mites in the skin. This is called crusted scabies, and

## Contents

Pubic lice.....	4
How do you get pubic lice? .....	4
What are the signs and symptoms? .....	4
If I think I have pubic lice, how soon can I have a check-up? .....	5
What does the check-up involve?.....	5
Where can I get a check-up? .....	5
What's the treatment for pubic lice? .....	6
When will the signs and symptoms go away?.....	7
How soon can I have sex again? .....	7
Do I need to have a check-up to see if the pubic lice have gone? .....	7
Can pubic lice go away without treatment?.....	8
Does having pubic lice affect my fertility? .....	8
What happens if I get pubic lice when I'm pregnant or while I'm breastfeeding? .....	8
Do pubic lice cause cervical cancer? .....	8
Scabies .....	9
How do you get scabies? .....	9
What are the signs and symptoms? .....	9
If I think I have scabies, how soon can I have a check-up?.....	10

can affect older people and people with certain illnesses, such as HIV infection.

Getting pubic lice and scabies is common. These infections are easily passed from one person to another through close body contact or sexual contact. Anyone can get and pass them on. It's also possible for children to get scabies through close body contact.

This booklet gives you information about pubic lice and scabies, what to do if you're worried about them and how to protect yourself.

What does the check-up involve? .....	10
Where can I get a check-up? .....	10
What's the treatment for scabies? .....	11
When will the signs and symptoms go away? .....	12
How soon can I have sex again? .....	12
Do I need to have a check-up to see if the scabies has gone? .....	12
Can scabies go away without treatment? .....	12
Does having scabies affect my fertility? .....	12
What happens if I get scabies when I'm pregnant or while I'm breastfeeding? .....	13
Does scabies cause cervical cancer? .....	13
<b>General information</b> .....	13
How can I help protect myself from sexually transmitted infections? .....	13
When should I have a test for a sexually transmitted infection? .....	14
Will I have to pay for tests and treatment? .....	14
Will I know how long I've had pubic lice or scabies? .....	15
Should I tell my partner(s)? .....	15
Where can I get more information and advice? .....	15
A final word .....	16

# Pubic lice

## How do you get pubic lice?

- Pubic lice have nothing to do with poor hygiene.
- Pubic lice can be passed from one person to another by close body or sexual contact with someone who has pubic lice.
- They can be found in pubic hair; underarm and leg hair; hair on the abdomen and chest, beards and, rarely, in eyebrows and eyelashes. They don't live in the hair on the head.
- Pubic lice can live away from the body. But because they depend on human blood for survival, they rarely leave the body unless there's close body contact with another person. Pubic lice move by crawling from hair to hair – they can't fly or jump.
- Occasionally pubic lice may be spread by contact with clothing, bedding and towels that have been used by someone with pubic lice.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

Some people don't get symptoms, or may not notice the lice or eggs, so you may not know whether you or a partner have pubic lice. It can take from five days to several weeks after coming into contact with pubic lice before signs and symptoms appear. You might notice:

- brown eggs on pubic or other body hair
- itching, irritation and inflammation in the affected area, sometimes caused by scratching
- sky-blue spots (which disappear within a few days) or very tiny specks of blood on the skin
- black powder in your underwear, from lice droppings.

Some people see pubic lice move, but they're tiny and difficult to see, and they keep still in the light. You or a partner might see the lice, eggs (nits) or droppings.

Sometimes pubic lice will be noticed during a routine genital or medical examination even if a doctor or nurse isn't looking for them.

## **If I think I have pubic lice, how soon can I have a check-up?**

You can have a check-up as soon as you have signs or symptoms for the doctor or nurse to look at, or if you think you might've been in contact with pubic lice. Some people won't develop visible signs or symptoms straight away and you may be asked to come back for another appointment later on.

## **What does the check-up involve?**

In most cases, a doctor or nurse can tell if you have pubic lice just by looking. They may use a magnifying glass to look for lice and eggs, which are very small and may not be easily visible. The doctor or nurse may pick up a louse from the hair or skin and look at it under a microscope to check it's a pubic louse.

## **Where can I get a check-up?**

There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the one you feel most comfortable with.

A check-up can be done at:

- a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
- your general practice
- some contraception and young people's clinics.

If you know you have pubic lice, you can go to a pharmacy for advice and treatment.

## What's the treatment for pubic lice?

- Treatment for pubic lice is simple and involves using a special cream, lotion or shampoo. The doctor, nurse or pharmacist will advise you on what treatment to use and how to use it.
- You apply the cream, lotion or shampoo to the affected area and sometimes the whole body. Lotions tend to be more effective than shampoos. Some treatments can be rinsed off after 10–15 minutes, others are left on for longer.
- To be effective, treatment needs to be repeated after 3–7 days.
- You don't need to shave off pubic or other body hair.
- Wash your clothing, bedding and towels in a washing machine on a very hot cycle (60°C or higher) to kill the lice and avoid re-infection.
- You can also buy treatments for pubic lice from pharmacies – these are useful if you're sure you have pubic lice and want to self-treat. Ask the pharmacist if you have any questions, or are unsure how to use the treatment.
- If you decide to treat yourself, you may still want to consider having a sexual health check to make sure you don't have a sexually transmitted infection.
- Tell the doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you're pregnant, think you might be, or if you're breastfeeding. This may affect the type of treatment you're given.
- Complementary therapies (treatments outside of mainstream healthcare) can't cure pubic lice.
- Your sexual partner(s) should be treated at the same time even if they don't have any signs and symptoms.

## When will the signs and symptoms go away?

If you use the treatment according to the instructions, it's rare for it not to work.

Even after successful treatment, itching may continue for a few days. There may be lice or eggs (nits) in your body hair after treatment but these can be removed with a special comb that you can get from a pharmacy.

## How soon can I have sex again?

It's strongly advised that you don't have any sex – including vaginal, anal or oral sex – or close body contact until you and your partner(s) have finished the treatment and any follow-up treatment. This is to help prevent you being reinfected or passing the infection on to someone else.

## Do I need to have a check-up to see if the pubic lice have gone?

No. If you've used the treatment as instructed, washed your clothing, bedding and towels and your partner(s) have also been treated then the treatment should've been successful.

If you still have symptoms or are concerned that you still have pubic lice, you should have a further check-up about a week after treatment. Rarely, you may need more treatment as the lice can develop resistance to treatments.

## **Can pubic lice go away without treatment?**

No. And if you delay seeking treatment you risk passing them on to someone else.

## **Does having pubic lice affect my fertility?**

No. Having pubic lice doesn't affect your fertility.

## **What happens if I get pubic lice when I'm pregnant or while I'm breastfeeding?**

Pubic lice can be treated while you're pregnant or breastfeeding. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will advise you about the right treatment for you. Permethrin cream is safe to use.

## **Do pubic lice cause cervical cancer?**

No. Pubic lice don't cause cervical cancer.



# Scabies

## How do you get scabies?

Scabies can be passed from one person to another by close body or sexual contact with someone who has scabies.

The mites which cause scabies can be found in the genital area, on the hands, between the fingers, on the wrists and elbows, underneath the arms, on the abdomen, on the breasts, around the nipples, on the penis and scrotum, on the feet and ankles, and around the buttocks.

The mites can live away from the body for up to 36 hours, so scabies can also be spread by clothing, bedding and towels.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

Some people won't have any visible signs or symptoms, or may not be aware of them. It's usually 3-6 weeks after coming into contact with scabies before signs and symptoms appear, but if you've had scabies before, it can take 1-3 days.

You might notice:

- Intense itching in the affected areas which may only be noticed at night, or which becomes worse in bed at night or after a hot bath or shower.
- An itchy red rash or tiny spots. Sometimes the diagnosis can be difficult because the rash can look like other itchy conditions, such as eczema.
- Inflammation or raw, broken skin in the affected areas – usually caused by scratching.

Scabies mites are very tiny and impossible to see with the naked eye. Fine silvery lines are sometimes visible in the skin where mites have burrowed.

Sometimes scabies will be noticed during a

routine genital or medical examination even if a doctor or nurse isn't looking for it.

## **If I think I have scabies, how soon can I have a check-up?**

You can only be certain you have scabies if you have a check-up. You can have a check-up as soon as you have signs or symptoms for the doctor or nurse to look at, or if you think you might've been in contact with scabies. Some people won't develop visible signs or symptoms straight away, and you may be asked to come back for another appointment later on.

## **What does the check-up involve?**

A doctor or nurse can often tell if you have scabies just by looking at the affected areas. They may gently take a skin flake from one of the areas and look at it under a microscope to see if there's a mite present.

In some cases, treatment will be suggested if scabies is suspected, even if it can't be confirmed.

## **Where can I get a check-up?**

There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the one you feel most comfortable with.

A check-up can be done at:

- a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
- your general practice; ask your doctor or practice nurse
- some contraception clinics and young people's services.

If you know you have scabies you can go to a pharmacy for advice and treatment.

## What's the treatment for scabies?

- Treatment is simple and involves using a special cream or lotion. The doctor, nurse or pharmacist will advise you on what treatment to use and how to use it.
- You apply the cream or lotion usually to the whole body from the chin and ears downwards. This ideally should be left overnight. Some treatments should be rinsed off after 8-12 hours, others are left on for 24 hours.
- To be effective, treatment needs to be repeated after seven days.
- Wash clothing, bedding and towels in a washing machine on a very hot cycle (60°C or higher) and dry them in a hot dryer to kill the mites and avoid reinfection.
- You can also buy treatments for scabies from pharmacies. These are useful if you're sure you have scabies and want to self-treat. The pharmacist will be able to advise if you have any questions, or are unsure how to use the treatment.
- If you decide to treat yourself, you may still want to consider having a sexual health check, to make sure you don't have a sexually transmitted infection.
- Tell the doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you're pregnant, think you might be, or if you're breastfeeding. This may affect the treatment you're given.
- Everyone in your household, sexual partner(s) and anyone you've had close personal contact with should be treated at the same time, even if they don't have signs or symptoms.
- Complementary therapies (treatments outside of mainstream healthcare) can't cure scabies.

## When will the signs and symptoms go away?

If you use the treatment according to the instructions, it usually works.

Even after successful treatment, the itching or rash may continue for a few weeks. Special tablets (antihistamines) or creams (hydrocortisone) can help ease the itching.

## How soon can I have sex again?

It's strongly advised that you don't have any sex – including vaginal, anal or oral sex – or close body contact until you **and** your partner(s) have finished the treatment and any follow-up treatment. This is to help prevent you being reinfected or passing the infection on to someone else.

## Do I need to have a check-up to see if the scabies has gone?

You may need to go back to check the scabies has gone and that you haven't come into contact with scabies again. If you have any questions, ask the doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

## Can scabies go away without treatment?

No. And if you delay seeking treatment you risk passing it on to someone else.

## Does having scabies affect my fertility?

No. Scabies doesn't affect your fertility.

## What happens if I get scabies when I'm pregnant or while I'm breastfeeding?

Scabies can be treated while you're pregnant or breastfeeding. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will advise you on the right treatment for you. Permethrin cream is safe to use but if you're breastfeeding, it'll need to be thoroughly washed off the breasts and nipples before any feed and re-applied if necessary.

## Does scabies cause cervical cancer?

No. Scabies doesn't cause cervical cancer.

# General information

## How can I help protect myself from sexually transmitted infections?

The following measures will help protect you from getting and passing on most sexually transmitted infections including chlamydia, gonorrhoea and HIV.

- Use condoms (male/external or female/internal) every time you have vaginal or anal sex.
- If you have oral sex (going down, giving head), use a condom to cover the penis, or a dam (latex or plastic square) to cover the female genitals or male or female anus.
- If you're not sure how to use condoms correctly visit [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk) for more information.
- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.

## When should I have a test for a sexually transmitted infection?

If you or a partner think you might have a sexually transmitted infection (STI), it's important not to delay getting a test.

Have a test if:

- you or a partner have, or think you might have, symptoms
- you've recently had sex without a condom with a new partner
- you, or a partner, have had sex without a condom with other partners
- during a vaginal examination, your doctor or nurse says that the cervix is inflamed and/or there's an unusual discharge
- a sexual partner tells you they have an STI
- you have another STI
- you're pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

Don't delay seeking advice – clinics don't mind doing sexual health check-ups.

## Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?

All tests are free through NHS services.

Treatment is also free unless you go to your general practice when you may have to pay a prescription charge for some treatments.

You'll have to pay for treatments that you get directly from a pharmacy.

## Will I know how long I've had pubic lice or scabies?

Sometimes it can be difficult to know where you got pubic lice or scabies from. A check-up can't tell you how long you've had them. If you feel upset or angry about having pubic lice or scabies, don't be afraid to discuss how you feel with the staff at the clinic or general practice.

## Should I tell my partner(s)?

If you're found to have pubic lice or scabies, it's important that your current sexual partner(s) and any other recent partners are also checked and treated. The staff at the clinic or general practice can discuss this with you.

## Where can I get more information and advice?

The National Sexual Health Helpline provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is **0300 123 7123**. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am – 8pm and at weekends from 11am – 4pm.

For more information on sexual health visit [www.sexwise.org.uk](http://www.sexwise.org.uk)

Information for young people can be found at [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

You can find details of sexual health clinics and services and details of general practices and pharmacies on these websites.

- England, [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- Wales, [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)
- Scotland, [www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)
- Northern Ireland, [www.sexualhealthni.info](http://www.sexualhealthni.info) and [www.hscni.net](http://www.hscni.net)

## A final word

This booklet can only give you general information.

The information is based on evidence-based guidance produced by The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH).



the sexual health company



sexwise.org.uk

[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

To order more copies of this booklet go to [fpa.org.uk/shop](http://fpa.org.uk/shop)

This booklet was originally produced by the sexual health charity FPA and is now published by McCorquodale trading as FPA.

FPA is owned by McCorquodale (Midlands) Ltd, a company limited by guarantee, registration number 11912315.

© FPA November 2018

© Crown Copyright Public Health England.

ISBN 978-1-912202-23-2

The information in this booklet was accurate at the time of going to print. Booklets are reviewed regularly. Next planned review by November 2021.

If you'd like information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to give feedback email [fpadirect@fpa.org.uk](mailto:fpadirect@fpa.org.uk)