

Fact Sheet

Body Lice

What are body lice?

Body lice are parasitic insects that live on clothing and bedding used by infested persons. Body lice feed on blood and usually only move to the skin to feed. Body lice frequently lay their eggs on or near the seams of clothing.

How are body lice spread?

Body lice are spread through direct physical contact with a person who has body lice, or through contact with clothing, beds, bedding, or towels that have been used by an infested person.

Where are body lice found?

Body lice generally are found in the seams of clothing and bedding used by infested people. Sometimes body lice can be seen on the body when they feed. Occasionally eggs are attached to body hair. Lice found on the head and scalp, are not body lice; they are head lice.

What are the symptoms of body lice?

Intense itching and rash caused by an allergic reaction to the louse bites are common. When body lice infestation has been present for a long time, heavily bitten areas of the skin can become thicker and discolored, especially around the waist, groin, and upper thighs.

As with other lice infestations, scratching of the bites can cause sores on the body, and these sores sometimes can become infected.

How do you know you have body lice?

Body lice infestation is diagnosed by finding eggs and crawling lice in the seams of clothing. Sometimes a louse can be seen on the skin crawling or feeding. Sometimes lice and nits are large enough to be seen with the naked eye, but a magnifying lens may be needed to find them. Diagnosis should be made by a health care provider if you are not sure.

What is the treatment for body lice?

A body lice infestation is treated by improving the personal hygiene of the infested person, including a regular (at least weekly) change into clean clothes. Clothing, bedding, and towels used by the infested person should be washed using hot water and machine dried using the hot cycle.

Sometimes the infested person also is treated with a medicine that can kill lice; however, this usually is not necessary if personal hygiene is maintained and items are washed appropriately at least once a week. A lice treatment should only be applied if directed by your health care provider.

How can it be prevented?

Body lice are spread most commonly by direct contact with an infested person or an infested person's clothing or bedding. These are steps that can be taken to help prevent and control the spread of body lice:

- Bathe regularly and change into clean clothes at least once a week; wash infested clothing at least once a week.
- Machine wash and dry infested clothing and bedding using the hot water laundry cycle and the high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry-cleaned OR sealed in a plastic bag and stored for 2 weeks.
- Do not share clothing, beds, bedding, or towels of an infested person.