

BODY LICE INFESTATION

What are human body lice?

Body lice are small insects that live on the body and in the clothing or bedding of humans. They feed only on human blood. Homeless persons who cannot get clean changes of clothes or take a bath or shower regularly are at risk for getting body lice.

How are body lice different from head and pubic lice?

Body lice and head lice look almost the same. Head lice are smaller than body lice. Head lice are found only on the head while body lice are found on the clothing or on parts of the body other than the head. Body lice spend most of their time on the clothing of an infested person, visiting the body up to five times a day to feed. The eggs (called nits) of body lice are cemented to clothing fibers and seams or, occasionally, to body hairs. Head lice live in people's hair and glue their eggs directly to hair near the scalp. Pubic lice have a different shape than head and body lice. Pubic lice are round and have a crab-like appearance. Pubic lice are usually found in pubic hair, but may occasionally be found on other coarse body hair such as armpit and facial hair.

What do body lice look like?

The body louse has three life stages: the egg (nit), the nymph, and the adult. Nits are small (less than 1 mm long), oval, and yellow to white in color. They are generally easy to see in the seams of clothing, particularly around the waistline and under the armpits. The early stage of the body louse is called a nymph. It looks like the adult louse but is smaller. The adult body louse is grayish-white in color, has six legs, and is about the size of a sesame seed (2-4 mm long).

What are the signs and symptoms of body lice infestation?

The most common signs of body lice infestation are intense itching and a red rash located on the chest and back. The bites from body lice are seen first as small red dots that develop into light red raised areas of the skin with a white center. Body lice infestations that have gone on for a long time may lead to thickening and discoloration of the skin, particularly around the waist, groin, and upper thighs. Additional skin infections caused by bacteria can result from the infested person scratching the bites.

Can body lice transmit disease?

Yes, trench fever, typhus, and louse-borne relapsing fever, are known to be carried by the human body louse. Infections with the organism that causes trench fever are occasionally seen in the United States. Homeless individuals with chronic alcoholism and body lice infestation are at higher risk for infection with the agent of trench fever than the general population. Epidemic typhus and louse-borne relapsing fever do not occur in the United States.

How are body lice spread?

Body lice can spread in crowded conditions where cleanliness is poor and when clothing and/or bedding are shared. Infestations are more common in cooler climates and seasons when heavier clothes are worn. Lice need human body heat to mature and to hatch eggs. Eggs will remain alive on clothing for up to 30 days when away from a human.

How are body lice infestations diagnosed?

Infestations are diagnosed by looking closely in the seams of clothing and on the body for eggs and for crawling lice. Body lice are usually found on clothing that is close to the skin and will be

seen on other layers only when there is a heavy infestation. It is unusual for one individual to be infested with more than ten lice at a time. Body lice infestation may be suspected in homeless people with itching and a rash on the body.

How are body lice infestations treated?

The infested person should shower; individuals with extensive body hair may apply a one percent permethrin or pyrethrin shampoo (pediculicide) to the body. Infested clothing and bedding should be washed in hot water (130° F). Items should then be placed in a clothes dryer on the hot cycle.

How can body lice infestations be prevented?

Avoid sharing clothing (including headwear) or bedding. When possible, discard infested clothing. Remove and wash clothing frequently (at least once per week). Regular bathing can reduce itching and chance of secondary bacterial infections.