

BODY LICE

What are body lice?

Body lice (scientific name: *Pediculus humanus humanus*) are small insects that live on the clothing or bedding of humans and feed on human blood. People who do not shower or bathe frequently or have access to clean clothing (including homeless individuals) are at risk for getting body lice.

What do body lice look like?

Body lice have three life stages: egg (nit), nymph, and adult. Nits are small, oval eggs that are yellow to white in color. Nits take about a week (6-9 days) to hatch into the next life stage, where they become nymphs. Nymphs look like tiny adult body lice and are about the size of a pinhead. Nymphs shed their skin (molt) three times and become adults about 9-12 days after hatching. Adult body lice are tan to grayish-white in color, have six legs, and are about the size of a sesame seed.

Three Stages of Body Lice (pictures enlarged to show detail)



Where are body lice found?

Body lice are usually found infesting (or crowding and crawling in or on) people's clothing or bedding, including sheets and blankets. Body lice can also be found on the skin when they are biting and feeding on blood. Nits are easy to see in the seams of clothing, especially around the waistline and under the armpits, but they may occasionally be attached to body hair.

Lice found on the head or scalp are called head lice, not body lice. Lice that have a round, crab-like appearance and are found in pubic hair or other coarse body hair (armpit, chest, and facial hair) are called pubic lice.

What are the signs and symptoms of body lice infestation?

The most common signs of body lice infestation are intense itching and development of a rash caused by an allergic reaction to the bites of body lice. A long-term body lice infestation may lead to thickening and discoloration of the skin, particularly around the waist, groin, and upper thighs, causing a condition called "vagabond's disease". Intense scratching can cause sores, which may lead to bacterial or fungal infections.

Can body lice transmit disease?

Yes. Body lice can spread trench fever, epidemic typhus, and louse-borne relapsing fever. Infections with the bacteria that cause [trench fever](https://www.cdc.gov/bartonella/transmission/index.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/bartonella/transmission/index.html>) are occasionally reported in the United States. Homeless individuals with chronic alcoholism and body lice infestation are at higher risk for trench fever than the general population. Epidemic typhus and louse-borne relapsing fever are rarely, if ever, reported in the United States.

How are body lice spread?

Body lice are spread among people living in crowded and unsanitary conditions when clothing and/or bedding are shared by people. Infestations are most common in homeless populations in the United States. Lice will die within 5-7 days at room temperature if removed from a person's body. However, eggs or nits can survive on clothing for up to 30 days away from a person's body.

How do you know if someone has body lice?

Body lice infestations are identified by finding eggs and lice in the seams of clothing and sometimes by finding lice crawling or feeding on the skin. Body lice are usually found on clothing that is close to the skin and will usually be seen on other layers of clothing only when there is a heavy infestation of lice.

How do you get rid of body lice?

A person that has body lice should shower and regularly change into clean clothes to get rid of body lice and keep them from coming back. Infested clothing, bedding, and towels should be washed in hot water (at least 130°F) and then placed in a clothes dryer on the hot cycle to kill any lice and nits. In extreme cases, individuals may be treated with a pediculicide, which is a medicine that will kill body lice. Treatment with a pediculicide is not usually necessary if hygiene is maintained and personal items are washed at least once a week. If a pediculicide is required, follow instructions on the product label or the directions given by a healthcare provider.

How can body lice be prevented?

You can help prevent body lice by bathing and showering regularly. Bathing can also reduce itching and the chances of bacterial or fungal infections caused by scratching. Clothing and bedding should be removed and washed frequently (at least once per week) on a high heat setting. Sharing clothing or bedding with others should be avoided to prevent the spread of body lice.

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