

Pediculosis

Pediculosis is the technical term used to describe the symptoms caused by an infestation of lice on the human body.

The eggs laid by lice are referred to as nits. Full-grown lice are about the size of a sesame seed and feed on blood with their tiny needle-like mouthparts.

Lice are parasites which affect various parts of the body, namely the head, the rest of the body and the pubis, which we shall go on to look at in more detail in a moment.

As we said, Lice are parasites which affect various parts of the body, namely the head, the rest of the body and the pubis.

As their name suggests, head lice occur on the heads, body lice on the rest of the body and pubic lice in the hair around the area of the groin.

Head lice are spread through direct head-to-head contact with an infested person or object. Body lice are similarly spread via contact with infected people and items of clothing and public lice are spread through intimate contact with an infested individual.

We shall now go on to look in more detail at the three main types of lice mentioned earlier.

Head-lice and body lice are similar in appearance, resembling miniature ants with large front legs in order to grab and hold on to the hair shafts.

Pubic lice are actually quite distinct from both head and body lice, with large pincer-like claws making them look like crabs, hence their nickname 'crabs'.

The main symptom associated with pediculosis is itching, in itself more of an inconvenience than a problem per se. However, itching leads to scratching which can cause sores which may become infected. In extreme cases, body lice can also be a vector for typhus and trench fever.

There are three main stages in the life-cycle of a louse: the egg (known as 'nits'), the nymph and the adult. Eggs undergo an incubation period of 7-9 days before hatching into a nymph. The nymph stage lasts between 10-12 days before fully maturing into an adult louse.

Adult lice lay several hundred eggs close to the scalp, which are glued to the hair shafts. The presence of pale eggs, nymphs and/or adults is a sign of an active infestation. Dead eggs or casts left behind after an egg has hatched are darker in colour and are not indicative of an active infection.

Finally, as far as treatment is concerned, medicated shampoos and lotions are the first choice, with rinses to separate the eggs from the hair shafts. Combing with a fine-toothed comb is required in order to remove all of the lice and nits.

In some cases, lice may be unaffected by commercially available treatments, in which case other alternatives such as electrical combs can be used.