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## Head Lice and Pubic Lice

Lice are tiny, white, wingless parasites that may live on the skin, scalp, or clothing. Head lice live on the scalp; body lice live on clothing; and pubic lice (also called crabs) live among the pubic hairs, eyelashes, and on underarms. Lice lay tiny oval eggs called nits, which become cemented to individual human hairs.

Lice are easily spread by direct contact or through shared personal items such as clothing, combs, towels, and pillow cases. Pubic lice are usually transmitted through sharing the same bed or through sexual contact. Lice are not a sign of poor hygiene; anyone can get them no matter how clean you keep your body.

The first sign of lice is usually mild to severe itching and irritation in the area involved. To determine whether you have lice, look for the tiny nits tightly attached to hairs. Sometimes you can find the adult lice too. Head lice most often infest the back of the head and the back of the ears. They may be confused with particles of hardened hair spray or dandruff, but this brushes out easily while lice and nits do not.

The best way to prevent lice is to keep your distance from people who have it until they've been treated. However, people often get lice without knowing where or from whom they got it.

The treatment for lice is simple and highly effective if done properly. Purchase such over-the-counter medications as Nix or RID and follow the instructions on the label. Shake the medication well before use.

For head lice, apply the medication directly to the scalp and to the back of the ears, being careful to keep the eyes closed. For pubic lice, apply it to the hairy areas from the neck to the knees. In both cases, use enough medication to saturate the hair. Leave the medication on for four hours and then rinse it off in a shower using soap or shampoo until the water runs clear. Comb the hair well with a fine-toothed comb after the treatment so as to remove all of the nits. Removing the nits is easier if you soak the hair for ten minutes with a solution of half vinegar and half water, dry the hair, and then comb. RID comes with such a comb, but any fine-toothed comb will do. An additional treatment application in four or five days is often recommended, but no further treatment is needed. Overly treating the infested areas is irritating and possibly even dangerous.

Since lice tend to spread amongst people living close together, all members of the family or household should be treated for lice at the same time. On the day that treatment is started, you should wash in hot water all clothing worn in the last week as well as bedding and towels. Iron or dry clean things that can't be washed. Clean combs and brushes with water and detergent. And clean toilet seats with bleach to get rid of any pubic lice.

If the lice don't seem to go away after treating twice with an over-the-counter medication, call your health care professional. He or she may be able to prescribe a stronger medication. Also, you may have scabies. These are more stubborn mites that are often found between folds of skin on the fingers and toes, wrists, underarms, and groin. Scabies require prescription medications.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at [www.kaiserpermanente.org/california](http://www.kaiserpermanente.org/california), then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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