



Crabs

What are crabs?

Crabs (also called pubic lice) are small, wingless insects that infest pubic hair. Both men and women can get crabs.

What causes crabs?

Crabs are usually spread through sexual contact. They can also be spread through contaminated clothing and bedding.

What are the symptoms of crabs?

Symptoms, which usually appear within 5 days of being exposed, include itching in the groin area. The crabs look like small flakes of skin to the naked eye, but you can actually see the insects with a magnifying glass. You may also see white or gray dots in your pubic hair; these are louse eggs.

How will I know if I have crabs?

Your doctor or other health-care provider can tell if you have crabs by examining the infested area.

How are crabs treated?

Medicated creams and shampoos can cure crabs. Some of these treatments are available without a prescription at the drug store. Follow directions carefully. You do not need to shave your pubic hair to remove crabs.

Clothes, bedding, towels, and other items that may contain the lice should be machine-washed and dried on a hot cycle setting, or dry-cleaned. Articles that cannot be washed can be sealed in a plastic bag for 72 hours. Fumigation of living areas is not necessary.

A person can become re-infested after treatment if exposed to crabs again.

What happens if crabs go untreated?

In addition to the discomfort of the infestation, repeated scratching of the infested area can result in a serious skin infection. If you have symptoms or think you've been exposed to crabs, get examined and treated immediately to avoid any complications and continued transmission.

Do sex partners have to be treated?

Yes. If you're diagnosed with crabs, it's important to tell everyone you've had sex with recently, so they can be examined and treated, too. Take *all* your medication as directed, even if you feel better before the medicine is finished. Don't have sex until you and the people you've had sex with have been completely treated and all of your symptoms have disappeared, or you could infest each other again.

Household members, including children, should also be examined, even if they have no symptoms.

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Crabs, Continued

What if I'm pregnant?

We don't know of any serious effects – on the mother or the baby – of having crabs during pregnancy, but you should tell your provider that you're pregnant when you seek treatment for crabs. Some medicated shampoos and creams used to treat crabs could be dangerous to an unborn baby and should not be used by women who are pregnant or breast-feeding, so you should tell your healthcare provider if you're pregnant or breast-feeding when you seek treatment for crabs.

All pregnant women should be tested for other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. You should be tested again during your pregnancy if you are at higher risk for getting an STD. For example, you are at higher risk if you have a new partner during pregnancy, or if you have more than one partner. If left untreated, STDs can be devastating for your baby. To protect yourself and your baby against HIV and other STDs, use a latex condom whenever you have sex.

How can I avoid crabs?

Latex condoms may be helpful in preventing the sexual transmission of crabs, but only when the infestation is covered or protected by the condom.

Infections that are sexually transmitted can be avoided by not having sex. *If you are sexually active*, you can reduce your risk of getting crabs and most other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, by having sex only in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner you are sure is not infected. If you are having sex outside of such a relationship, you can reduce your risk of STDs by:

- 1) *Always using a latex condom (or other type of latex barrier) whenever you have sex – vaginal, anal, or oral.* Condoms made of “natural” materials, such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy, but not against STDs. If you are allergic to latex, you can use condoms made of polyurethane or other synthetic materials.
- 2) *Limiting the number of people you have sex with.*
The more partners you have, the higher your risk.
- 3) *Avoiding alcohol and drugs when you have sex.* Drinking or getting high makes it much harder to remember to use condoms to protect yourself and others. For free, confidential help with a substance abuse problem, call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), or just call 311.

More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department clinics in all 5 boroughs of New York City. Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required. For a list of clinics and hours, visit nyc.gov/health, or call 311.

