



Texas Department of State Health Services  
Health Service Region 1  
Epidemiology

## Body Lice Fact Sheet

### **What are body lice?**

Body lice are parasitic insects that live on clothing and bedding used by infested persons. Body lice frequently lay their eggs on or near the seams of clothing. Body lice must feed on blood and usually only move to the skin to feed.

### **Where do body lice come from?**

*Pediculus humanus*, the body louse, is a louse insect and is an ectoparasite whose only hosts are humans. The louse feeds on blood several times a day and resides close to the skin to maintain its body temperature. The life cycle of the body louse has three stages: egg, nymph and adult.

Eggs, also known as nits, are hard to see and often confused for dandruff. Nits are laid by the adult female and are cemented at the base of the hair shaft nearest the skin. They are 0.8 mm by 0.3 mm, oval, and usually yellow to white. They usually take 1-2 weeks to hatch. Viable eggs are usually located within 6 mm of the skin. Nits may be seen in the seams of an infested person's clothing particularly around the waistline and under armpits. They may be attached to the body hair.

Nymphs are eggs that have hatched but are immature. They look like an adult body louse but smaller. They are about the size of a pinhead. Nymphs mature in three stages and become adults about 9-12 days after hatching. To live, the nymph must feed on blood.

The adult body louse is about the size of a sesame seed, has 6 legs, and is tan to greyish-white. Females lay eggs. Females are usually larger than males and can lay up to 8 nits per day. Adult lice can live up to 30 days on a person's body. To live, lice must feed on blood several times a day. Without blood meals the louse will die within 1-2 days off the host.

### **What are the symptoms of body lice infestation?**

Intense itching and rash caused by an allergic reaction to the louse bites are common symptoms of body lice infestation. When body lice infestation has been present for a long time, heavily bitten areas of the skin can become thickened and discolored, particularly around the midsection of the body (waist, groin, upper thighs). This condition is called "vagabond's disease."

### **How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?**

It may take up to two to three weeks for the intense itching symptoms to appear.

### **How do body lice spread?**

Body lice are spread through direct physical contact with a person who has body lice or through contact with

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articles such as clothing, beds, bed linens, or towels that have been in contact with an infested person. Dogs, cats, and other pets do not play a role in spread of human lice.

### **How is a body lice infestation diagnosed?**

Body lice infestation is diagnosed by finding eggs and crawling lice in the seams of clothing. Sometimes a body louse can be seen on the skin crawling or feeding. Although body lice and nits can be large enough to be seen with the naked eye, sometimes a magnifying lens may be necessary to find lice or nits. Diagnosis should be made by a health care provider if you are unsure about infestation.

### **Are there long-term complications from having body lice?**

Body lice can transmit disease. Body lice can spread epidemic typhus, trench fever, and louse borne relapsing fever. Although louse-borne (epidemic) typhus is no longer widespread, outbreaks of this disease still occur during times of war, civil unrest, natural or man-made disasters, and in prisons where people live together in unsanitary conditions. Louse-borne typhus still exists in places where climate, chronic poverty, social customs, war, and social upheaval prevent regular changes and laundering of clothing. Scratching can cause sores on the body which can become infected with bacteria or fungi.

### **How is body lice infestation treated?**

A body lice infestation is treated by improving the personal hygiene of the infested person, including assuring a regular (at minimum weekly) change of clean clothes. Clothing, bedding, and towels used by the infested person should be laundered using hot water (at least 130° F) and machine dried using the hot cycle. An infested person is sometimes treated with a pediculicide, a medication that can kill lice. A pediculicide is generally not needed if hygiene is maintained and items are laundered at appropriate temperatures at least weekly. A pediculicide should be used exactly as directed on the bottle or per instructions by your doctor.

### **Who gets body lice?**

Body lice infestation is found worldwide, but generally is limited to persons who live under conditions of crowding and poor hygiene and who do not have access to regular bathing and changes of clean clothes. The homeless, transient populations, refugees and survivors of war or natural disasters, and those living under crowded conditions are more at risk due to not having access to bathing and clean clothing. Infestations can spread rapidly under these conditions. Infestation is unlikely to persist on anyone who bathes regularly and who has at least weekly access to freshly laundered clothing and bedding. Infestations can occur in people of all races.

### **How long can a person have a lice infestation?**

A person who continues to have poor hygiene, who does not have regular change of clean clothes and linens, or regular bathing may continue to have body lice as long as new eggs are being laid and nymphs or adult lice have blood to feed on.

## **How common is body lice?**

Body lice is not a notifiable condition so numbers of cases are not recorded. Body lice is known to be common among people without access to regular bathing, clean clothes and linens, and those who are homeless or have crowded poor hygiene living conditions.

## **How can body lice be prevented?**

Steps to be taken that can help prevent and control the spread of body lice are:

- Bathe regularly and change into properly laundered clothes at least once a week; launder infested clothing at least weekly.
- Machine wash and dry infested clothing and bedding using hot water (at least 130°F) laundry cycle and high heat drying cycle. Clothing and items that are not washable can be dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag and stored unopened for 2 weeks.
- Do not share clothing, beds, bedding, and towels used by an infested person.
- Fumigation or dusting with chemical insecticides sometimes is necessary to control and prevent the spread of body lice for certain diseases (epidemic typhus).

## **Are there any restrictions for people with who have a body lice infestation?**

People with body lice should avoid direct contact with others and not share clothing, beds, bedding, or towels with others. People who have body lice do not have to be excluded from school or work.

## **Where can I get more information?**

More information can be obtained at your local health department, healthcare provider, or at <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/body>.

## **Sources:**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013, September 24). Parasites – Lice – Body Lice. Retrieved March 31, 2014, from <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/lice/body/>.

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