This leaflet gives you information about pubic lice and scabies and how to get treated. It also offers advice on how to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Pubic lice & Scabies

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Pubic lice can be passed on by close intimate contact with someone who has pubic lice. They can also be passed from one person to another during sex.

Scabies is usually transmitted by direct body contact or simply by close physical contact with someone who has scabies. It can also be passed from one person to another during sex.

What are pubic lice?

Pubic lice are tiny parasitic insects that live in coarse body hair, such as pubic hair. They are yellow-grey and about 2mm long. They have a crab-like appearance, so they are often known as ‘crabs’. ‘Nits’ are the eggs which appear as brownish dots fixed to the hair.

Pubic lice are easily passed from one person to another through close body contact or sexual contact. Both men and women can get pubic lice, and pass them on.

Some people will not have any symptoms, or may not notice the lice or eggs, so you may not know whether you or your partner has pubic lice.
Getting pubic lice has nothing to do with poor hygiene.
Pubic lice are different to the head lice which some people get on their scalp.

How are pubic lice passed on?
Pubic lice can be passed from one person to another by close body or sexual contact with someone who has pubic lice.
They can be found in pubic hair, underarm and leg hair, the abdomen and chest, eyelashes and occasionally in eyebrows and beards. They do not live in the hair on the head.
Lice can live for up to 24 hours off the body. However, because pubic lice depend on human blood for survival, they will rarely leave the body unless there is close body contact with another person. Pubic lice move by crawling from hair to hair; they cannot fly or jump.
It is occasionally possible for pubic lice to be spread by clothing, bedding and towels.

What are the signs and symptoms?
Some people will not have any visible signs or symptoms at all, or may not be aware of them. It can take several weeks after coming into contact with pubic lice before signs and symptoms may appear. The signs and symptoms are the same for both men and women. If you do get symptoms you might notice:
- itching in the affected areas
- black powdery droppings from the lice in your underwear
- brown eggs on pubic or other body hair
- irritation and inflammation in the affected area,
sometimes caused by scratching
• sky-blue spots (which disappear within a few
days) or very tiny specks of blood on the skin.

You might see the lice, eggs or droppings, or your
partner might notice them. Pubic lice are tiny and
difficult to see, and they keep still in the light.

When can I be checked for pubic lice?
You can have a check-up as soon as you have signs
or symptoms for the doctor or nurse to look at or if you think you might have been in contact with
pubic lice. Some people won’t develop visible signs
or symptoms straightaway, and you may be asked
to come back for another appointment later on.
You can go to a genitourinary medicine (GUM)
clinic, a sexual health clinic or to your GP. If your
GP doesn’t offer sexual health checks, they will
refer you to a clinic that does. A leaflet Sexually
transmitted infections – where to go for help and
advice is available free from fpa (see back cover).

If you are sexually active, it is not uncommon to
have a sexually transmitted infection (STI) as well as
pubic lice at the same time. Ask about being tested
for sexually transmitted infections too.

What does the check-up involve?
In most cases, a doctor or nurse can tell if you
have pubic lice just by looking. They may use a
magnifying glass to look for lice and eggs, which
are very small and may not be easily visible. The
doctor or nurse may pick up a louse from the
hair or skin and look at it under a microscope to
confirm their opinion; in clinics, the result is usually
available immediately.
Sometimes pubic lice will be noticed during a routine genital or medical examination.

**What is the treatment for pubic lice?**

Treatment for pubic lice is simple and involves using a special cream, lotion or shampoo. There are several different types that can be used. You apply the cream, lotion or shampoo to the affected area or areas. Some treatments can be rinsed off after 15 minutes; others are left on for two hours, 12 hours or 24 hours. The doctor, nurse or pharmacist will advise you how to use the treatment. You do not need to shave off pubic hair.

Some treatments need to be repeated after three to seven days.

Clothing, bedding and towels should be washed on a very hot cycle (greater than 50°C) to avoid re-infection.

You can also buy treatments for pubic lice from pharmacies: these are useful for anyone who is sure they have pubic lice and wants to self-treat. The pharmacist will be able to advise if you have any questions, or are unsure how to use the treatment.

If you do decide to treat yourself, you may want to consider having a sexual health check at some point, to make sure you don’t have a sexually transmitted infection at the same time.

You should tell the doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you are, or think you might be, pregnant or if you are breastfeeding. This will influence the type of treatment that is given to you.

Currently there is no evidence that complementary therapies can treat pubic lice.
How effective is the treatment?
Treatment is very effective. If you use the treatment according to the instructions it is rare for it not to work. Avoid sex or close body contact until you and your partner have both finished treatment, otherwise you could be re-infected.

Even after successful treatment, itching may continue for a few days. There may be dead nits in the hair after treatment, which can be removed with a special comb.

If the first treatment doesn’t work, another type may need to be tried, as the lice can develop resistance.

Can pubic lice go away without treatment?
No. And if you delay seeking treatment you risk passing the condition on to someone else.

What is scabies?
Scabies is caused by tiny parasitic mites. About 0.4mm long, smaller than a pinhead, they burrow into the skin and lay eggs.

Scabies is easily passed from one person to another through close body contact or sexual contact. Both men and women can get scabies, and pass it on.

Unless you develop symptoms you may not know whether you or your partner has scabies.

A more severe and uncommon form of the condition occurs when there are very many mites