Patient information: Lice (The Basics)

What are lice? — Lice are tiny insects that can live on people’s skin and in their hair, and cause itching. Three types of lice can live on or close to people’s bodies (figure 1):

● **Head lice** can live on your scalp and in the hair on your head
● **Body lice** can live in the clothes you wear, and feed on your body (these are uncommon)
● **Pubic lice**, also called “crabs,” can live in your pubic hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, armpits, beard or mustache, or other areas (picture 1)

Lice do not fly or jump. They are spread by person-to-person contact or by sharing clothes and personal items. For example, you can get pubic lice by having sex with someone who has it. You can get head lice from head-to-head contact with someone with has it. You might also be able to get head lice from sharing items like hats or combs, but this probably doesn’t happen as often.

Lice can lay eggs, also called “nits,” which then hatch into new lice. People can find lice and nits on their body or in their hair (picture 2).

How can I tell if I have lice? — Most people have itching on the part of the body where the lice are. With pubic lice, people can also have pale blue spots on the lower belly or upper thighs, or itching and redness of the eyes or eyelids.

But some people might not have any symptoms at all. They might find out they have lice only by seeing small white nits or live lice in their hair. Sometimes it is easier to see nits, because lice can move quickly and hide from view.

Is there anything I can do on my own to get rid of lice? — Yes. To get rid of head and pubic lice, you can:

● Use a special fine-toothed comb to carefully comb out nits and lice from your hair
● Use a non-prescription cream or lotion on your hair or body that kills lice. Be sure to follow all of the directions on the label.

You might hear or read about other treatments for lice that involve products like olive oil or mayonnaise. Most doctors do not recommend these “natural” treatments.

You will also need to get rid of and kill the lice on items in your home so you don’t get lice again. To do this, you can:

● Wash clothes, bedding, and towels in hot water and dry them on the hottest setting
● Vacuum your carpets and furniture
● Put things you cannot wash into a sealed plastic bag for 2 weeks

If you or your child has lice:

● All of the adults and children in the home should be checked for lice
● Talk with the school nurse

If you have pubic lice, you need to:

● Tell anyone you had sex with in the past month, so he or she can be treated, too
● Be tested for other diseases you can catch when you have sex. The person who gave you pubic lice might have given you another disease, too.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Yes. If you can't get rid of your lice by doing the things described above, see your doctor or nurse. He or she might prescribe a stronger lotion or a pill for you to take.

What can I do to prevent getting lice? — You can reduce your chances of getting lice by:

● Not sharing a bed, clothes or personal items with someone who has lice
● Not having sex with someone who has pubic lice