

# **MONROE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

## **DISEASE CONTROL UNIT 753-5164**

### **Pediculosis** **(head lice, body lice, pubic lice, cooties, crabs)**

#### **What is pediculosis?**

Pediculosis is an infestation of the hairy parts of the body or clothing with eggs, larvae or adult lice. The crawling stages of this insect feed on human blood which can result in severe itching. Head lice are usually located on the scalp; crab lice are located in the pubic area; and body lice live along seams of clothing but travel to the skin to feed. Animal lice are different and do not live and breed on humans.

#### **Who gets pediculosis?**

Anyone may become louse infested under suitable conditions of exposure. Pediculosis is easily transmitted from person to person during direct contact. Head lice infestations are frequently found in school settings or institutions. Crab lice are most often sexually transmitted. Body lice infestations can be found in people living in crowded, unsanitary conditions where clothing is infrequently changed or laundered.

#### **How is pediculosis spread?**

For both head lice and body lice, transmission can occur during direct contact with an infested individual. Sharing of clothing and combs or brushes may also result in transmission of these insects. While other means are possible, crab lice are most often transmitted through sexual contact.

#### **What are the symptoms of pediculosis?**

Usually the first indication of an infestation is the itching or scratching in the area of the body where the lice feed. Scratching at the back of the head or around the ears should lead to an examination for head louse eggs (nits) on the hair. Itching around the genital area should lead to an examination for crab lice or their eggs. Scratching can be sufficiently intense to result in secondary bacterial infection in these areas.

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

It may take as long as two to three weeks or longer for a person to notice the intense itching associated with this infestation.

#### **For how long is a person able to spread pediculosis?**

For head lice, as long as lice or eggs remain alive on the infested person's hair. For body lice, as long as lice or eggs remain alive on clothing.

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### **What is the treatment for pediculosis?**

Medicated shampoos or cream rinses containing pyrethrins are used to kill lice. Products containing pyrethrin are available over-the-counter. Retreatment after seven to 10 days is recommended to assure that no eggs have survived. Nit combs are available to help remove nits from hair. Dose and duration of shampoo treatment should be followed according to label instructions.

Head lice and nit removal may be facilitated by:

1. Applying a damp towel to the scalp for 30 to 60 minutes and combing with a fine-toothed nit comb designed for this purpose.
2. Soaking the hair with white vinegar (3% to 5% acetic acid) and then applying a damp towel soaked in the same solution for 30 to 60 minutes followed by nit combing.
3. It is important to go through the entire head of hair daily for 2 weeks to make sure that all lice and nits are removed. If nits do not come off easily with a nit comb, remove with your fingernails. If any nits survive the treatment, they can hatch and begin the infestation again.

### **What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of pediculosis?**

1. Avoid physical contact with infested individuals and their belongings, especially clothing, headgear and bedding.
2. Health education on the life history of lice, proper treatment and the importance of laundering clothing and bedding in hot water (130 degrees for 20 minutes) or dry cleaning to destroy lice and eggs is extremely valuable.
3. When indicated, it is important to inspect children for head lice and body lice, particularly children in schools, institutions, and summer camps.