



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Body lice

(ukus)

What are body lice?

Body lice are small, usually pale- to grey-colored insects that live and reproduce in clothing worn by humans. Body lice feed on human blood and can survive only on people. The oblong eggs (called “nits”) are usually tan- or brown-colored but can appear whitish under bright lights. They are about 1 to 2 mm long. The nits hatch after about 1 week then pass through 3 stages (over 1 to 2 weeks) before becoming full-sized adults that are about 2 to 3 mm long.

How do you get them?

Body lice cannot fly. They move from one person to another when infested clothing or bedding is shared, or when a person with body lice has physical contact with another. The lice spend most of their time off of the person’s body, making direct contact only when feeding, usually when the person is sleeping. They can survive for about 1 week between meals. Infestations with body lice are much more common in adults than in children.

What are the symptoms of body lice?

The reactions to or results of louse feedings may be the first symptoms noted. Feeding activities can cause itching at the feeding sites. Scratching may break the skin and lead to skin infections. Feeding sites may look like small, red dots on the skin. Body lice are known to transmit bacterial infections that cause three human diseases: louse-borne typhus (*Rickettsia prowazeki*), trench fever (*Rochalimaea quintana*), and louse-borne relapsing fever (*Borrellia recurrentis*).

Should a person with body lice stay away from work or school

Yes, until they are properly treated. A person with body lice should limit their contact with others for 24 hours after starting effective treatment.

For how long is a person contagious?

A person is contagious as long as they are carrying live lice.

What is the treatment for body lice?

Regular household laundering with hot water and hot-air drying can decontaminate infested clothing. There are also medicated lotions to control body lice.

How do you keep from getting it?

Reduce the risk of catching body lice by changing and laundering clothes and avoiding potentially infested bedding.

For more information, see the [CDC’s website](#).