



# Body lice information sheet (created March 2026)

## What are body lice?

Body lice are small parasitic insects (*Pediculus humanus corporis*) that live mainly in **clothing seams**, moving onto the skin only to feed. They cause intense itching and can lead to skin irritation or infection. Body lice are about 1-3mm long are visible to the naked eye or with a magnifying glass.



Body lice are most associated with:

- Poor sanitation
- Overcrowding
- Where clothes are not changed or washed regularly
- Limited access to laundry, regular washing facilities or clean clothes

## Signs and symptoms

- Persistent itching, especially around the waist, torso, underarms, or where clothing fits tightly.
- Red bumps or scratch marks from itching.
- Lice or eggs (nits) visible in the seams of clothing.
- If lice is present for a long time, the skin may become thickened or darker in some areas.
- Body lice does not always cause symptoms.

## How they spread

Body lice spread easily through:

- Wearing unwashed clothing for long periods.
- Sharing bedding, sleeping bags, or clothing.
- Close physical contact in overcrowded or communal living situations.

## Treatment & management

The most effective treatment for body lice is cleaning *clothing and bedding*, not the skin.

- Wash clothes, bedding and towels on a **hot wash (54°C or above)** or tumble-dry on high heat.
- Use dissolvable (alginate) laundry bags to help stop the spread of infection. Put dirty clothes and bedding straight into these bags. Do not overfill - only fill the bag about two-thirds full. The whole bag goes into the washing machine and dissolves during the wash. Alginate bags can be bought from [Amazon](#).
- If washing is not possible, clothes can be **ironed with a hot iron** or put in a hot dryer.
- Alternatively, NHS advice for [Pubic Lice](#) suggests placing cleaned clothes into a plastic bag for 2 weeks to help to kill the lice.



- Change into clean clothing immediately afterwards.
- Shower or wash the skin after changing clothes.
- If washing clothes and bedding does not remove the lice, a cream or lotion may be used.

### **Advice for anyone in the homeless pathway**

- Use day centres or outreach services that offer showers, clothing, and laundry support.
- Ask staff for fresh clothing if washing facilities are unavailable.
- Use hostel laundry services regularly where available.
- Try to rotate clothing if you have spare items.
- Avoid sharing clothing, bedding or sleeping bags where possible.
- Outreach teams can help arrange laundry, showers, or access to medical checks.

### **When to seek medical help**

Body lice can occasionally transmit more serious infections, so early attention is important.

Get help if you notice:

- Pus, redness, or swelling (signs of a secondary infection)
- Fever or feeling unwell
- Itching that does not go away after laundering
- Concerns about other health symptoms

**Contacts:** Homeless Health Nurse Drop-in clinics at The Passage and CSTM or ask your key worker to contact the nurse [clcht.homeless@nhs.net](mailto:clcht.homeless@nhs.net). Alternatively, contact GP.

### **Day centres & outreach service support**

#### **CSTM**

- Laundry and shower facilities available, including an accessible single shower.
- They will be supported to see Homeless Health Service and then use the shower.
- Clients are advised to discard old clothing - new clothing can be provided.

#### **The Passage**

- Laundry and shower facilities available
- Clients are expected to engage with health teams for relevant clinical assessment and support.
- Clothing, toiletries, and other essentials are supplied directly to clients.

**ShowerBox** provides access to shower and laundry facilities at certain times and locations. The [website](#) provides more information.

**St Mungo's (Rochester Row office)** has a large supply of donated clothing that can be given to clients.