

Scabies

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is scabies?

Scabies is a fairly common condition of the skin caused by a microscopic mite. Mites that cause scabies burrow into the skin producing pimple-like irritations and severe itching. Occasionally bacterial infections may occur following intense scratching at the site of the burrow.

Who gets scabies?

Scabies infestations can affect people from all socioeconomic levels without regard to age, sex, race or standards of personal hygiene. Clusters of cases, or outbreaks, are occasionally seen in nursing homes, day care centers and other institutions.

How is scabies spread?

Mites that cause scabies are transferred by direct skin-to-skin contact. In severe cases indirect transfer from undergarments or bedclothes can occur only if these have been contaminated by an infected person immediately beforehand.

How is scabies diagnosed?

Definitive diagnosis involves demonstrating the presence of the mite by skin scrapings and microscopic examination of the scraped specimen.

What are the symptoms of scabies?

The most prominent symptom of scabies is intense itching, particularly at night. The areas of the skin most affected by scabies include the webs and sides of the fingers, around the wrists, elbows and armpits, waist, thighs, genitalia, abdomen and lower buttocks. In infants younger than two years old the symptoms are likely to appear on the head, neck, hands and feet.

How soon do symptoms appear?

After exposure, symptoms will appear from 2-6 weeks in people who have not previously been exposed to scabies infestations. People who have had a previous infestation with scabies mites may show symptoms within 1-4 days after subsequent re-exposures.

When and for how long is a person able to spread scabies?

A person is able to spread scabies until mites and eggs are destroyed, usually after one treatment with an effective anti-scabies medication. Individuals with scabies should not attend school or daycare, nor enter their workplace until the day after treatment is initiated. Except in severe cases, inanimate objects such as clothing, bedding or furniture does not spread mites that cause scabies.

What is the treatment for scabies?

Medicated lotions applied to the skin or in severe cases, medication taken by mouth are available through a physician's prescription for the treatment of scabies. Sometimes itching may persist for one to two weeks after treatment, but this should not be regarded as treatment failure or re-infestation.

Avoid over treatment with anti-scabies medication.

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What can be done to prevent the spread of scabies?

Avoid physical contact with infested individuals and their belongings, especially clothing and bedding.

In severe cases, clothing and bed linen worn or used by an infested person in the 48 hours before

treatment may be laundered and dried at the highest temperature or stored in a container such as a

plastic bag for 5-7 days to kill mites and their eggs. Use of environmental pesticides should be avoided. Preventive therapy is recommended for household members of an infested persons or close

contacts of persons in nursing homes, day care centers or institutions. Health education on the life

cycle of scabies, proper treatment and the need for early diagnosis and treatment of infested individuals and contacts is extremely important.

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