

Scabies

Scabies is a fairly common disease caused by a very tiny mite that lives in, or just below, the surface of human skin. The female scabies mite lays her eggs in burrows or channels just beneath the skin. Young mites develop in a few days and emerge from the burrows. Intense itching, particularly at night, and the appearance of small, raised, red bumps, blisters or rashes are the most obvious signs of scabies. The areas of the skin most affected by the scabies mite include the webs and sides of the fingers, and around the wrists, elbows, armpits, waist, stomach, thighs, genitalia, nipples, breasts and lower buttocks. Occasionally, persons develop bacterial infections because of intense scratching due to the mites. The first time a person gets scabies, the itching begins in two to six weeks. If a person has had scabies before, he or she is more sensitive to a reinfestation and symptoms appear much more quickly, within one to four days. A physician needs to diagnose scabies because red, itchy rashes or blisters can be caused by other conditions or disorders that resemble scabies.

Scabies mites are transferred from one person to another by direct skin contact, including sexual contact. The mite does not jump from one person to another. At controlled temperatures and relative humidity in the laboratory, scabies mites have survived off a human for 10 or more days, but under ordinary household conditions, most mites live for only a few days at room temperature. Clothing and bedding can play a role in the spread of scabies when worn or used by a person with scabies immediately beforehand.

Skin lotions or creams containing lindane, permethrin, pyrethrin or crotamiton are applied to the skin of a person with scabies and to that of other individuals who have had skin contact with that person. These treatment products are only available with a doctor's prescription. Instructions for their use vary from product to product, but treatment products should not be used more often than the doctor prescribes. It is very important not to overuse treatment products.

To properly treat and kill the scabies mites and eggs, it is necessary to apply the lotion or cream thoroughly to all areas of the body from the chin down to, and including, the soles of the feet. Treatment is repeated in seven days to get rid of any eggs that survive the first treatment. Itching often lasts for more than one week and can even last several weeks after effective treatment. Itching that continues does not mean the treatment has failed or that the person has gotten scabies again.

It is uncommon for only one person in a family to have scabies. The ongoing physical contact that occurs in family settings or communal living easily spreads the scabies mite. Therefore, family members, sexual contacts, and others who have had skin-to-skin contact with a person diagnosed with scabies also needs to be treated as soon as the person is diagnosed.

After the scabies treatment is applied, the person should change into clean clothing. Clothing, bedding and personal articles of the person who is being treated should be disinfested at the same time. Since temperatures above 125.6 degrees F. for 10 minutes are lethal to mites and their eggs, most personal articles of clothing and bedding can be disinfested by machine washing in hot water or by using the hot cycle of a clothes dryer. Items that cannot be placed in a washing machine or dryer, or be dry-cleaned, can be sealed in a plastic bag for one week to prevent them from coming into contact with human skin. Fumigating rooms and using insecticide sprays on furniture, infant carriers, child car seats and carpets is not recommended for cases of common scabies. To clean these types of items, and the houses, wards and room of persons with scabies, thorough vacuuming is sufficient.

A person can spread scabies until mites and eggs are destroyed by treatment. Persons with scabies should not attend school or day care, or be at the workplace, until the day after the first treatment. It is important to understand how scabies is spread; that persons with scabies need to be diagnosed early; and that persons diagnosed with scabies, and their contacts, need to be treated at the same time.