



SCABIES

General Information Sheet

What is scabies?

Scabies is an infestation of the skin by a microscopic itch mite. These mites burrow into the upper layer of the skin where they live and lay their eggs. The most common symptoms of scabies are intense itching and a pimple-like skin rash. The scabies mite usually is spread by direct, prolonged, skin-to-skin contact with a person who has scabies.

Scabies is found worldwide and affects people of all races and social classes. Scabies can spread rapidly under crowded conditions where close body and skin contact is frequent. Institutions such as nursing homes, extended-care facilities, and prisons are often sites of scabies outbreaks. Child care facilities also are a common site of scabies infestations.

How soon after infestation do symptoms of scabies begin?

If a person has never had scabies before, symptoms may take as long as 4-6 weeks to begin. It is important to remember that an infested person can spread scabies during this time, even if he/she does not have symptoms yet. In a person who has had scabies before, symptoms usually appear much sooner (1-4 days) after exposure.

What are the signs and symptoms of scabies?

The most common signs and symptoms of scabies are intense itching, especially at night, and a pimple-like itchy rash. The itching and rash each may affect much of the body or be limited to common sites such as the wrist, elbow, armpit, webbing between the fingers, nipple, penis, waist, belt-line, and buttocks. The rash also can include tiny blisters and scales. Scratching the rash can cause skin sores; sometimes these sores become infected by bacteria.

Tiny burrows sometimes are seen on the skin; these are caused by the female scabies mite tunneling just beneath the surface of the skin. These burrows appear as tiny raised and crooked grayish-white or skin-colored lines on the skin surface. Since mites are often few in number (only 10-15 mites per person), these burrows may be difficult to find. They are found most often in the webbing between the fingers, in the skin folds on the wrist, elbow, or knee, and on the penis, breast, or shoulder blades.

The head, face, neck, palms, and soles often are involved in infants and very young children, but usually not adults and older children.

How did I get scabies?

Scabies usually is spread by direct, prolonged, skin-to-skin contact with a person who has scabies. Contact generally must be prolonged; a quick handshake or hug usually will not spread scabies. Scabies is spread easily among household members. Scabies sometimes is spread indirectly by sharing articles such as clothing, towels, or bedding used by an infested person.

How is scabies diagnosed?

Diagnosis of a scabies infestation usually is made based on the customary appearance and distribution of the rash and the presence of burrows. Whenever possible, the diagnosis of scabies should be confirmed by identifying the mite, mite eggs, or mite fecal matter (scybala). This can be done by carefully removing a mite from the end of its burrow using the tip of a needle or by obtaining skin scraping to examine under a microscope for mites, eggs, or mite fecal matter. It is important to remember that a person can still be infested even if mites, eggs, or fecal matter cannot be found; typically fewer than 10-15 mites can be present on the entire body of an infested person who is otherwise healthy. However, persons with crusted scabies can be infested with thousands of mites and should be considered highly contagious.

How long can scabies mites live?

On a person, scabies mites can live for as long as 1-2 months. Off a person, scabies mites usually do not survive more than 48-72 hours.

Can scabies be treated?

Yes. Products used to treat scabies are called **scabicides** because they kill scabies mites; some also kill eggs. Scabicides to treat human scabies are available only with a doctor's prescription; no over-the-counter products have been approved for treatment against scabies.

Always follow carefully the instructions provided by the doctor and pharmacist, as well as those contained in the box or printed on the label. When treating adults and older children, scabicide cream or lotion is applied to all areas of the body from the neck down to the feet and toes; when treating infants and young children, the cream or lotion also is applied to the head and neck. The medication should be left on the body for the recommended time before it is washed off. Clean clothes should be worn after treatment.

In addition to the infested person, treatment also is recommended for household members and sexual contacts, particularly those who have had prolonged skin-to-skin contact with the infested person. All persons should be treated at the same time in order to prevent reinfestation. Retreatment may be necessary if itching continues more than 2-4 weeks after treatment or if new burrows or rash continue to appear.

Never use a scabicide intended for veterinary or agricultural use to treat humans!

Who should be treated for scabies?

Anyone who is diagnosed with scabies, as well as his or her sexual partners and other contacts who have had prolonged skin-to-skin contact with the infested person, should be treated.

Treatment is recommended for members of the same household as the person with scabies, particularly those persons who have had prolonged skin-to-skin contact with the infested person. All persons should be treated at the same time to prevent reinfestation.

Retreatment may be necessary if itching continues more than 2-4 weeks after treatment or if new burrows or rash continue to appear.

How soon after treatment will I feel better?

Sometimes itching and rash will persist for up to two weeks, even after successful treatment. If itching continues more than 2-4 weeks after initial treatment or if new burrows or rash continue to appear (if initial treatment includes more than one application or dose, then the 2-4 time period begins after the last application or dose), retreatment with scabicide may be necessary; seek the advice of a physician.

Can I get scabies from my pet?

No. Animals do not spread human scabies.

How can I remove scabies mites from my home and clothing?

Scabies mites do not survive more than 2-3 days away from human skin. Items such as bedding, clothing, and towels used by a person with scabies can be decontaminated by machine-washing in hot water and drying using the hot cycle or by dry-cleaning. Items that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned can be decontaminated by removing from any body contact for at least 72 hours. Fumigation, i.e. "bug bombs," of living areas is **not recommended**.

If I come in contact with a person who has scabies, should I treat myself?

No. If a person thinks he or she might have scabies, he/she should contact a doctor. The doctor can examine the person, confirm the diagnosis of scabies, and prescribe an appropriate treatment. Products used to treat scabies in humans are available only with a doctor's prescription.

Sleeping with or having sex with any scabies infested person presents a high risk for transmission. The longer a person has skin-to-skin exposure, the greater the likelihood for transmission to occur. Although briefly shaking hands with a person who has scabies could be considered a relatively low risk, holding the hand of a person with scabies for 5 minutes or more should be considered a relatively high risk of transmission.

Additional Information and Resources

If you have further questions or concerns, contact the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department Division of Epidemiology by telephone at 304-348-1088, or by email at epi@kchdvw.org.

For additional information on scabies, visit the Centers for Disease Control website:
<http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/scabies/>