

Scabies

What Are Scabies?

Scabies infestations are caused by tiny mites that live under the skin. Only one type of mite is transmitted from human to human. These mites cannot survive off the human body for more than 48 hours, and cannot reproduce off the body. Animal mites occasionally are transmitted to humans but will not live long because they are unable to reproduce on the human body.

How Do You Get Scabies?

Scabies is spread by prolonged direct contact with skin or through shared bedding, towels and clothing of an infested person. This kind of contact may occur in household or day care settings. Scabies is not usually spread among adults in a work setting unless frequent physical handling of people or contaminated articles occurs, such as in a nursing home or hospital. Infestation occurs when female mites burrow under the skin and lay small numbers of eggs each day for several weeks.

Symptoms of a Scabies Infestation

Symptoms include a rash and intense itching that is especially severe at night. The itching and rash are believed to be "allergic" reactions to the mites and may occur away from the burrows themselves. The most common sites for the rash are the folds of skin between fingers, around wrists and elbows, and armpits. Other areas may include knees, waistline, thighs, male genitals, lower portion of buttocks, abdomen, and nipples on women. In infants and young children, the palms, soles, head, neck and face may also be affected.

Itching and rash may first appear from two weeks to two months after coming in contact with infested skin or articles. Symptoms may appear in less than two weeks if the person has had scabies before. The rash caused by scabies does not always look the same and may be hard to diagnose. It can often imitate other types of skin disorders. Scabies can be spread to others from the time a person acquires the mites (before rash appears) until 24 hours after treatment is completed.

Treatment and Control

A physician should be seen if scabies infestation is suspected. If there is a question of scabies, skin scrapings may be done before medication is prescribed. The physician may ask questions about household contacts and their health in order to decide if others need treatment and what medication is appropriate.

Several prescription medications are available from your doctor to effectively control the mites. Most are applied thinly but thoroughly to the entire body from the neck down.

Pay particular attention to hands, feet, areas between fingers and toes and under fingernails.

In infants and small children, apply medication to face and scalp also, but avoid the area close to the eyes.

It is important to follow the directions on the label of the medication. Some physicians may prescribe more than one treatment with the medication depending on the product used and the severity of the infestation.

Intimate clothing (underwear and pajamas), bedding and towels should be machine washed and dried in hot temperatures after treatment is completed.

Itching and rash may not go away immediately after treatment. These symptoms may last for two weeks to three months after the mites are dead. Ask your physician about medications that will relieve the itching.

If you have questions about Scabies, please talk with your health care provider.

