

Scabies Fact Sheet

Information for Healthcare Workers

What is scabies?

Scabies is an infestation of the skin caused by a very small insect-like parasite called a mite. It is found worldwide.

The female scabies mite lays her eggs just under the surface of the skin. The eggs hatch in 3-4 days and the larvae move out to the surface of the skin where they mature. There they mate and repeat the life cycle, gradually spreading the infestation.

Scabies spreads well in crowded conditions where there is frequent skin-to-skin contact between people, such as in hospitals, institutions, child-care facilities and nursing homes.

Crusted (Norwegian) scabies is an uncommon form of infestation where there is a large number of mites and widespread, crusted lesions. Norwegian scabies is more common in people with weakened immune systems. With this type of scabies, there is a larger number of mites and occasionally a total absence of itching, which creates a highly contagious situation even with casual contact.

What are the signs and symptoms?

For 2 to 6 weeks after infestation, there may be no symptoms. In persons who previously had a case of scabies, symptoms develop 1-4 days after re-exposure. The symptoms include a red rash which will become extremely itchy. This is often worse at night.

Rashes appear more commonly in the webs between the fingers, the insides of the wrists and elbows, the breasts, the male genitals, the belt line, the back and the buttocks. Infants may have a rash on the head, neck, palms or soles.

Scratching can result in a secondary infection of the skin.

Is it contagious?

Yes. Mites are usually transmitted by direct prolonged skin-to-skin contact, although they can be transmitted by bed linens and clothing. Scabies can be transmitted as long as the patient remains infested and untreated, including the time before symptoms develop.

In the case of Norwegian scabies, the number of mites is much larger, and the amount of contact needed with the infested person and the environment is less than with a regular case of scabies. Once away from the human body, mites do not survive more than 3-4 days.

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How is it treated?

Most creams or lotions are applied to the entire body from the neck down. The medicine may also need to be applied to the scalp, face, and neck of children, taking care to avoid the area around the mouth and eyes. In most cases, you leave the medicine on for 8 to 14 hours and then wash it off.

Healthcare workers can usually return to work after treatment is completed.

If you **have** scabies, you and anyone you have close contact with must all be treated at the same time. This keeps the mites from being passed back and forth from person to person. Until scabies has cleared up, you should avoid close contact with anyone and make sure not to share any personal items.

What should be cleaned?

To make sure that all the mites are killed:

- Wash all clothes, bedding, and towels that you used in the 3 days before starting treatment. Use hot water and use the hot cycle in a dryer or dry-clean these items.
- Place any items that cannot be washed or dry-cleaned in a closed plastic bag for 4-7 days.
- You do not have to wash items such as mattress or furniture, however; clean and carefully vacuum the room or rooms used by the person who had scabies.

To successfully treat scabies, all members of an affected household must be treated at the same time. Follow these instructions when using medicine to treat scabies:

- Take a lukewarm (not hot) bath or shower. Dry off well with a towel. Do not share this towel with others.
- Apply the medicine according to the directions. In most cases, the medicine is a cream or lotion that is applied in a thin, even layer over the whole body from the neck down.
- On infants and children, apply the medicine to the scalp, face, and neck as well as the rest of the body. Avoid the area around the mouth and eyes.
- Trim fingernails and toenails short. Brush the medicine thoroughly under the fingernails.
- Leave the medicine on for as long as recommended.
- Wash the medicine off with lukewarm, soapy water, and dry the skin.
- Put on clean clothing and change your bed linens. Wash all clothes, bedding, and towels that you used in the 3 days before starting treatment. Use hot water and use the hot cycle in a dryer or dry-clean these items or seal them in a plastic bag for 7 days.

Do not apply the scabies medicine more often than is recommended by your doctor.