

What is scabies?

Scabies is a common skin problem caused by the human itch mite. People of any age, race and social group can get scabies, regardless of personal hygiene.

HOW DO PEOPLE GET SCABIES?

The mite is transmitted by close skin-to-skin contact. The mite burrows into the skin, where it feeds and lays eggs. The mite only lives in the upper layers of the skin; it does not go into the bloodstream or other body organs. After a few weeks, the patient develops an allergic reaction causing the very itchy scabies rash.

WHAT DOES SCABIES LOOK LIKE?

The rash can look like hives, pimples, blisters or scaly and crusted bumps. Any body area can be affected, but it is common to see the rash on the hands, feet, underarms, belly button and genitals. In children less than 2 years old, the rash can be all over the body. The rash tends to be worse in the elderly or in people with a weakened immune system.

The rash and itching can be very mild or very severe; it depends on how the immune system responds to the mite. Not everyone reacts in the same way. This is why some people may have the mite but do not yet have a rash. It is common to see that only one or two people in the house have the rash, even though everyone has been exposed to the mite. It is important to treat all close contacts, not only those who have the rash.

HOW IS SCABIES DIAGNOSED?

Your doctor can diagnose scabies by doing a careful head-to-toe skin exam. Special tests are not always needed to make the diagnosis. Your doctor may perform a skin scraping to look for the mite or other clues under the microscope.

HOW IS SCABIES TREATED?

There are different medications that can be used to treat scabies. 5% permethrin cream is the most commonly used and is the first line treatment for most patients. This cream needs to be applied on the entire skin surface, from neck to toes, making sure it covers all body folds and the space between fingers and toes. The face is usually not affected in children and adults and doesn't usually need the cream unless specified by your doctor. However, in children less than 2 years old, permethrin cream should be applied to the whole body, from head to toe, as the head and neck areas can also be affected in this age group. Permethrin cream is left on the skin overnight for 8-14 hours before it is rinsed off the next day. The treatment needs to be repeated in one week.

There are other creams and oral medicines that can be used in special situations. These include specially made sulfur cream or ointment, other topical creams and oral ivermectin. Not all medications can be used in young infants and pregnant women. Ask your doctor which medication is safe for you and your family.

Your doctor may also prescribe other creams and oral medicines to help calm the itch and irritation from the rash. The itch and rash may persist for several weeks after treating scabies. If you are getting new bumps after one month, you should be evaluated again by your doctor.

In addition to the person with the rash, **treatment is required for all household members and close contacts, such as grandparents or babysitters.** Everyone should be treated at the same time to prevent re-infestation, even if contacts don't have a rash.

The mite lives in the skin, but it can also survive outside of the body in clothes and bed linens. Therefore, careful cleaning of bed linens, clothing, towels, strollers, car seats, etc. following the skin treatment is very important to help eradicate the infestation.

STEPS FOR SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT OF SCABIES

- Follow the medication instructions carefully.
- Repeat the treatment when instructed by your doctor (usually in 7 days).
- Treat all close contacts and household members.
- Treat everyone at the same time.
- Wash clothing, bed linens and towels using hot water and dry using the hot cycle the day after skin treatment.
- Items that cannot be washed can be decontaminated by dry-cleaning or placing in a sealed plastic bag for at least 72 hours.
- Vacuum furniture, carpets, car seats and strollers.
- Fumigation of living areas is not necessary.
- Pets do not need to be treated.



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