Indiana State Department of Health | Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About… Scabies

What are scabies?

Scabies is a skin infection caused by the burrowing itch mite, *Sarcoptes scabiei,* which can only be seen with microscope. The mites burrow under the skin to lay eggs. An allergic response to the proteins shed by the mites can cause intense itching. An infested person can spread scabies long before symptoms appear. Crusted (Norweigan) scabies is a severe form of the disease that affects the elderly and individuals with a compromised immune system or neurological conditions who may not experience the sensation of itching or a rash. These individuals are infested with large numbers of mites and are very contagious.

How are scabies spread?

Scabies is spread through skin-to-skin contact (including sexual contacts) with an infected individual or through contact with bedding, towels or clothing of an infested person. The incubation period for scabies ranges from 2 to 6 weeks in the first infection, meaning that an individual can spread the mites before symptoms even appear. Household pets do not spread scabies from person-to-person; but, mites that infest pets can also infest humans. These infestations are limited in time as the animal mites are unable to reproduce in human skin.

Who is at risk for scabies?

Scabies is more common in institutionalized settings (situations in which frequent skin-to-skin contact occurs such as nursing homes, child-care settings, correctional facilities, etc.).

How do I know if I have scabies?

The most common symptom of scabies is itching, particularly at night, and the appearance of burrows or thin wavy tunnels in the skin. Often blister-like

sores will appear in the burrows of the skin, and may become infected. These sores are especially prevalent in the webs between the fingers, the heels of the palms, the wrists, armpits, buttocks, genitalia, and elbows. Nipples may also be affected in older females.

A healthcare provider can diagnose scabies by visualizing the burrow or rash and by taking a scraping of the skin and looking for the mites, eggs or mites waste under a microscope. A dermatologist or experienced provider should be able to differentiate diagnoses of skin infections.

How can scabies be treated?

Prescription-only lotions, known as scabicides, are available to treat scabies. Most treatments that are currently available are considered to be pesticides and can be toxic if used inappropriately or too frequently. Be sure to follow the instructions provided with the medication and from your healthcare provider. Most scabicides are applied from the neck down and should be left on the skin for 8 hours. After the treatment application, the person being treated should shower or bathe to wash off the lotion and then put on clean clothes.

Household and close contacts, or individuals who have had direct skin-to-skin contact with a case during the 2-6 weeks prior to the appearance of the rash, should also be treated with the scabicide lotion at the same as the infested person to prevent reinfestation.

A second treatment may be needed 7-10 days later if new burrows or rashes should appear 24-48 hours after effective treatment. Itching may continue for 2-3 weeks following treatment, but that does not mean someone is still infested. Your health care provider may prescribe additional medicine to help relieve itching if it is severe.

On the day of treatment, other measures should be taken to clear the home of the infestation including:

- Laundering all linens, clothing, hats worn by an infested person used or worn within three days of the treatment application. Hot water and dry heat for at least 20 minutes should be used. Dry cleaning is recommended for items that can not be laundered.
- Seal any items in a plastic or garbage bag for up to a week that can not be washed or dry-cleaned.
- Vacuum rugs, upholstered furniture, mattresses used by infested individuals

How are scabies prevented?

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Website on scabies at:
http://www.cdc.gov/scabies/index.html

Mayo Clinic Website on scabies at:
http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/scabies/DS00451

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