

Fact sheet

Scabies

What is scabies?

Scabies is a skin infestation caused by very tiny parasites called human itch mites. Scabies mites burrow into the upper layer of the skin where it lives and lays its eggs.

How is scabies spread?

Scabies are spread almost always by direct, prolonged, skin-to-skin contact with a person who has scabies. A person with scabies can spread it even if he/she has no symptoms. Animals do not spread human scabies.

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. Tiny burrows sometimes are seen on the skin, and appear as tiny raised and crooked grayish-white or skin-colored lines on the skin surface. 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.

The rash also can include tiny blisters and scales. Scratching the rash can cause skin sores; sometimes these sores become infected by bacteria.

How long after infection do symptoms appear?

If a person has never had scabies before, symptoms may take as long as 4–6 weeks to appear. In a person who has had scabies before, symptoms usually appear much sooner (1–4 days) after exposure. 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 2–3 days.

Who is most at risk?

Household members and sexual partners of a person infested with scabies are more at risk of getting scabies. Institutions such as nursing homes, extended-care facilities, and prisons are often sites of scabies outbreaks. Childcare facilities also are a common site of scabies infestations.

What type of health problems are caused by scabies?

Some people such as those with weakened immune systems, elderly, disabled, or debilitated people are at risk for a severe form of scabies called crusted, or Norwegian, scabies. People with crusted scabies have thick crusts of skin that contain large numbers of scabies mites and eggs.

The mites in crusted scabies are much more numerous. Because they are infested with such large numbers of mites, persons with crusted scabies are very contagious to other

people. In addition to spreading scabies through brief direct skin-to-skin contact, people with crusted scabies can spread scabies indirectly by shedding mites that contaminate items such as their clothing, bedding, and furniture. People with crusted scabies should receive quick and aggressive medical treatment for their infestation to prevent outbreaks of scabies.

How is scabies diagnosed?

Scabies infestation is usually made based upon the rash and the presence of burrows under the skin. Whenever possible, your healthcare provider may identify the mite or mite eggs from a skin scraping.

How is scabies treated?

Products used to treat scabies are called scabicides because they kill scabies mites; some also kill mite eggs. Scabicides used to treat human scabies are available only with a doctor's prescription. No "over-the-counter" (non-prescription) products have been tested and approved to treat scabies. The instructions contained in the box or printed on the label should always be followed carefully.

Scabies treatment usually is recommended for members of the same household, particularly for those who have had prolonged skin-to-skin contact. All household members and other potentially exposed people should be treated at the same time as the infested person to prevent possible reexposure and re-infestation.

Itching may continue for several weeks after treatment even if all the mites and eggs are killed. If itching still is present more than 2–4 weeks after treatment or if new burrows or pimple-like rash lesions continue to appear, retreatment may be necessary.

How can scabies be prevented?

Scabies is prevented by avoiding direct skin-to-skin contact with an infested person or with items such as clothing or bedding used by an infested person.

Bedding and clothing worn or used next to the skin anytime during the 3 days before treatment should be machine washed and dried using the hot water and hot dryer cycles or be dry-cleaned. Items that cannot be dry-cleaned or laundered can be disinfested by storing in a closed plastic bag for several days to a week. Scabies mites generally do not survive more than 2–3 days away from human skin. Children and adults usually can return to childcare, school, or work the day after treatment.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- Your [local health department](#)
- [Utah Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)

