

Scabies Fact Sheet

Scabies is a highly contagious skin condition caused by a parasite

Scabies is caused by a mite that burrows into the upper layers of your skin and lays its eggs. Your skin can swell and become itchy in reaction to the mite. The mite does not spread viruses, bacteria, or other germs, but it is easy to spread the mite to others.

The scabies mite is spread through personal contact

You usually get scabies by close, prolonged contact with an infested person, such as during caregiving or by holding hands. Scabies can also be spread through sexual contact. Clothes, towels, or bed sheets can spread the scabies mite if these items were recently in contact with a person who has scabies. Scabies can spread quickly in crowded situations where there is frequent skin-to-skin contact, such as in hospitals, nursing homes, and child care centers.

Animals do not carry or spread the mite that causes scabies in humans, but they can carry other mites and parasites that can cause skin irritation or other diseases in people, so it's important for animals with infestations or skin conditions to be assessed by a veterinarian.

The most common symptom is a very itchy rash

The scabies rash most commonly appears in and around crevices or folds of your skin, such as those found around the hands, breasts, knees, elbows, armpits, and genital area. The scabies mite also burrows in areas where clothing is tight against the skin, such as around the wrists or the waistline. The rash often looks like red bumps or tiny blisters, which form a line where the mite has burrowed into the skin. The rash tends to be very itchy, especially at night.

Crusted scabies, sometimes called Norwegian scabies, is a severe form of scabies where a person has a very large number of mites that cause a widespread rash and scaling of the skin. This form of scabies is extremely contagious.

The scabies rash usually appears within 4 to 6 weeks of exposure to an infested person. If you recently had scabies and become re-infested, the rash usually appears much sooner, in about 1 to 4 days.

See your doctor for a diagnosis

Your doctor can perform a test to see if your rash is due to scabies. Scabies is confirmed by using a microscope to look for the presence of mites in skin scrapings.

Scabies is treatable

Topical creams that kill the mite, usually permethrin, are the most common treatment for scabies. Follow your doctor's instructions for using the cream correctly. Itching might continue for 1 to 2 weeks after treatment – it does not necessarily mean that the treatment failed or that you have scabies again.

Sometimes, another round of treatment is needed. For severe cases or if the topical cream is not effective, your doctor might prescribe a different medication that can be taken as a pill.

Scabies can be prevented

People with scabies should stay home from work, school, and other settings involving close contact with others until after they have completed treatment. If you had prolonged skin-to-skin contact with a person with scabies, you should be treated with the cream to prevent the illness.

Clothing, bed linens, and other personal articles worn or used by an infested person in the 48 hours before treatment should be washed and dried on hot cycles or professionally dry-cleaned. Clothing and linens that can't be washed should be wrapped up and stored away for at least 72 hours, since the mite cannot survive beyond that without contact with humans. Carpets and upholstery should be vacuumed. Fumigation is not necessary.