

Scabies



Symptoms

Scabies are tiny mites which burrow under the skin and cause an allergic reaction that results in a rash with raised bumps and intense itching, particularly:

- where there are skin folds such as in armpits and under breasts
- on hands and feet, especially in the space between fingers and toes
- on the inside of elbows and wrists
- on the genitals and groin area; in addition
- in very young children and babies who can have a rash on their face, scalp and palms.

Itching is worse when the skin is warm, such as at night while sleeping under blankets, or after a warm shower or exercise.

After the first exposure to the mites, it can take 4–6 weeks for the itching to develop. After subsequent exposures to the mites the itch and rash can appear in just a few days.

Less-common types of burrowing mites have different symptoms or cause less intense itching, and the pharmacist may advise you to seek medical attention.

Causes

The scabies mite lives only on humans and not on animals. You can catch scabies from someone who is already infected. This can be through touching hands or close sexual contact. Scabies is also spread by sharing personal items like clothes, bedding and towels.

After adult mites mate, the female burrows into the skin to lay her eggs. When the eggs hatch, the baby mites move up to the surface of the skin where they mature into adults in about 7 days.

Mites multiply rapidly and are easily spread to others, particularly where there are crowded living conditions such as in refugee camps, nursing homes, prisons and hospitals. People who have low immunity are more prone to infection.

Lifestyle options

You can stop the spread of scabies by:

- using a treatment for everyone who has been in contact with the mites
- not sharing personal items
- washing all exposed towels, bed linen, and washable soft toys in a hot wash cycle (>60 °C) the day after each treatment
- storing items you can't wash such as soft toys and cushions in a tightly-sealed plastic bag for at least 3 days.

Avoid scratching your skin to prevent a bacterial infection occurring. Ask your pharmacist for some medicines to relieve the itch such as crotamiton or corticosteroid cream, or antihistamine tablets or creams.

Pharmacy options

Always inform pharmacy staff if you are taking any other medicines, or if you have any other health conditions, because some over-the-counter medicines may not be suitable for you.

Treatments in the form of lotions and creams are available. To ensure the treatment is completely effective follow the product instructions carefully:

- Apply the lotion or cream over the entire body after bathing. Start from the chin and work your way down, making sure you cover the neck, back, and particularly the skin folds and between fingers and toes. Your doctor or pharmacist may advise if you need treatment for your facial area.
- Use a soft brush to apply the medicine under fingernails and toenails.
- Don't wash the treatment off – leave it on for as long as the instructions say. Some need to be left on overnight. You can wash or shower at the end of the recommended treatment time.
- Repeat the treatment after 8–10 days to kill any recently hatched mites. Ask your pharmacist for advice if you are unsure of how to apply the medication.

See your doctor if you are pregnant, you are treating a child under 2 years of age, or you have any medical condition that affects your immune system.

You should also see your doctor if the scabies rash does not improve in a month, starts to weep or becomes crusted, as you may have developed a bacterial infection which will need a different medicine.

School aged children should only go back to school the day after they have been treated.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable treatment for you.

More information

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au

MyDr: www.mydr.com.au/skin-hair/scabies

Disclaimer: The information provided is a guide only, is current at time of publishing, and is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or doctor.

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