

Fact Sheet: Scabies

What is Scabies?

It is an infestation of the skin caused by a very tiny insect called the human scabies mite. The mite burrows into the outer layer of skin to lay eggs. The mites are white or colorless and are about the size of a dot at the end of a sentence. Scabies affects people from all walks of life. Mites living off a person can survive 2-5 days but are capable of infesting another person for only the first two days.

What are the symptoms?

- Itching at the burrow site, may be worse at night.
- Tiny red dots on the skin following the burrow track (grey/silver lines).
- May not appear for 4-6 weeks after exposure. People who have had scabies previously may have symptoms in 1-4 days after a new exposure.

Although the infestation can vary in location and severity, it commonly shows up around the webs of the fingers or toes and around the waist and armpits. Other areas to check are the inner portions of the elbows and wrists, and in the creases of the groin area. It typically does not affect the face or scalp.

How is it spread?

Scabies is most commonly found in crowded groups of people and is transmitted through close personal contact. Due to the high frequency of scabies on the hands, shaking hands or holding hands such as in children's games can spread scabies. Any intimate skin-to-skin contact can spread scabies. Infested persons are able to spread scabies until all mites and eggs are destroyed which usually takes 1 or 2 treatments a week apart.

How is it treated?

For a positive diagnosis and treatment of scabies see your health care provider. Positive identification of the mite can be made only by using a microscope. Scabies can be cured in 24-48 hours with medication. However, the itching may last for 2-3 weeks, and is not a sign of medication failure.

- Apply the medication thoroughly from the neck down.
- Leave lotion on for the recommended amount of time (*according to the package insert*).
- Take a bath to remove the medication.
- Wash all clothing and bedding in hot water and dry in a hot dryer. Items such as stuffed animals and blankets that cannot be washed can be placed in an airtight bag for 2 weeks, or can be placed in a dryer on high for at least 1 hour.
- Vacuum all chairs and carpets where the infected individual has spent time.
- There is no immunity to scabies. If signs of scabies show up again, you need to return to your doctor for additional treatment.
- All household members should be treated at the same time.
- Persons with scabies should be excluded from school or work until the day after treatment.

How is it prevented?

- Prevention of new cases of scabies is based on early detection, diagnosis and treatment of scabies.
- Wash your hands frequently through out the day and teach your children to do the same.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

