



Scabies

PATIENT EDUCATION SERIES

What is scabies?

Scabies is a highly contagious and itchy, but treatable skin disease caused by the tiny mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*, which burrows under the skin, depositing eggs along the tunnel she creates. The eggs mature and become adult mites in 10 to 19 days. Patients with scabies are contagious from the time of infestation, even if no symptoms are present, and remain contagious until all mites and eggs are killed. The burrow is very itchy.

How is it transmitted?

Scabies is usually transmitted by close personal contact, including, but not limited to sexual contact. It can also be transmitted by contact with infested articles of clothing, bedding, towels, etc.

What are the symptoms?

The hallmark of scabies infection is intense itching, usually worse at night. Itching starts 2 to 6 weeks after the initial infestation, and is due to a local hypersensitivity reaction to the mite itself, rather than to the “bite” of the mite. Scabies also causes a rash with can be quite variable in presentation, but often appears as linear reddened burrows on the skin. Rash is often noted between the fingers, along the belt line, genitals, palms, soles.

How is it treated?

Permethrin 5% cream (elimite) is most commonly used for treatment of scabies, though sometimes alternate treatments will be chosen. Follow your medical provider’s instructions carefully for application of this product. Itching and rash may persist for 1 to 4 weeks after treatment for scabies, due to a continuing hypersensitivity reaction to the dead mites, and does not represent treatment failure. Sometimes your medical provider may prescribe a topical steroid cream to help with the post-treatment itch. An over-the-counter antihistamine such a diphenhydramine (Benadryl) or loratadine (Claritin) may also be used for itching. Never use the lotion more often than your provider has recommended, as this can cause further skin irritation.

It is also very important to prevent re-infestation by washing all your clothing, bedding and towels in hot water, followed by a hot dryer.

The mite can live no longer than 3 to 4 days off the human body. You should not wear unwashable articles of clothing for a week or so. Unwashable items may be sealed in plastic bags for 4 to 7 days to kill the mites. Dry cleaning will also kill mites on “unwashables”. All household contacts and sexual partners should be treated, whether they have symptoms or not, because of the long incubation period during which people are asymptomatic, but very contagious.

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