

Montgomery County Health Department
SCABIES

What is scabies?

Scabies is a fairly common infectious disease of the skin caused by a microscopic mite. Scabies mites burrow into the skin, producing pimple-like irritations or burrows. Scabies infections are typically very itchy.

Who gets scabies?

Scabies infections can affect people from all socioeconomic levels without regard to age, sex, race, or standards of personal cleanliness. Clusters of cases are occasionally seen in nursing homes, childcare centers, schools, and other institutions.

How is scabies spread?

Scabies mites are spread from person to person by direct skin-to-skin contact. Scabies can be transmitted during sexual contact. Indirect spread of the mites can also occur from clothing worn directly next to the skin or by bedding if these items were contaminated by infected persons. However, the scabies mite cannot survive more than 3 to 4 days away from the skin. Pets do not become infected and do not spread scabies infections.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within 2 to 6 weeks in people who have not previously been infected with the scabies mite. People who have previously been infected may show symptoms as soon as 1 to 4 days after re-exposure. Repeat infections tend to be less severe.

When and for how long can scabies be spread?

The scabies mite can be spread from an infected person for as long as the person is infected but not yet treated, including before symptoms first appear.

How is scabies treated?

Medicated skin lotions containing lindane (Kwell, Scabene), crotamiton (Eurax), or 5% permethrin (Elimite) are available for treating scabies infections. These medicines are available by prescription. Children and adults should be treated by applying the lotion over the entire body below the head. Infants and young toddlers should be treated over the whole body including the head and neck. 5% permethrin (Elimite) is the preferred choice for infants, young children, and pregnant or nursing women. Lindane should be used with caution in young children and pregnant women because it is absorbed through the skin. Instructions packaged with the skin lotions should be carefully read and followed. Sometimes, itching may continue for several days after treatment, but does not necessarily mean that treatment was ineffective. However, if symptoms continue, it may be necessary to repeat treatment in 7 to 10 days.

How can the spread of scabies be prevented?

Direct skin contact with infected persons should be avoided until they have been treated. Household and sexual contacts of infected persons should also receive treatment at the same time as the infected persons. Clothing worn directly next to the skin and bedding should be laundered with hot water and a hot drying cycle if possible. Items that cannot be laundered should be removed from the patient and stored for a week to allow the scabies mites to die (they cannot survive more than 3 to 4 days without skin contact). During school outbreaks of scabies, it is sometimes necessary to treat an entire group of children and their adult contacts at the same time even if symptoms have not appeared in all persons. Children can be allowed to return to school as soon as they have received treatment. Environmental disinfection rarely is needed.