

SCABIES

What is scabies?

Scabies is a common and highly contagious skin condition caused by a tiny parasite called the human itch mite. These mites burrow into the top layer of the skin to live and lay eggs, causing intense itching and a rash.

Scabies can affect anyone. It is more common in crowded places like long-term care homes, shelters and childcare facilities.

A more serious form called crusted scabies (formerly “Norwegian scabies”) occurs in people with weakened immune systems. It involves thick crusts on the skin and contains thousands of mites, making it very contagious and harder to treat.

What are the symptoms of scabies?

Symptoms usually appear four to six weeks after first exposure. If you've had scabies before, symptoms may show up in one to four days. Common signs include:

- Intense itching, especially at night
- Red rash, bumps or blisters
- Thin, wavy lines (burrows) on the skin
- Scratching, which can lead to skin infections

Scabies commonly affects areas such as the wrists, elbows, armpits, waist, buttocks, genitals, breasts, and the spaces between the fingers. In infants, it can also appear on the scalp, face, neck, palms of the hands, and soles of the feet.

Crusted scabies may cause scaly and thickened skin, little to no itching and hair loss in affected areas.

How does scabies spread?

Scabies spreads mainly through direct, prolonged skin-to-skin contact. It can also spread by sharing clothing, towels and bedding. People can spread scabies before symptoms appear and until they are fully treated. Crusted scabies can spread even through brief contact or contaminated surfaces.

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How can scabies be prevented?

There is no vaccine for scabies, but you can reduce the risk by:

- Avoiding close contact with someone who has scabies
- Not sharing clothing, towels or bedding
- Washing hands regularly with soap and warm water
- Cleaning and vacuuming living spaces

If someone in your household has scabies:

- Treat all close contacts at the same time, even if they don't have symptoms
- Wash clothes, towels and bedding used in the past three days in hot water and dry on high heat
- Seal items that cannot be washed in a plastic bag for at least 72 hours to a week

How is scabies treated?

Scabies won't go away on its own. Treatment includes prescription creams or lotions and oral medication for severe cases like crusted scabies.

Treatment tips:

- Apply medication to the whole body from neck down, including the head and scalp for infants and older adults
- Leave it on for the recommended time before washing off
- Put on clean clothes and use clean bedding after treatment
- A second treatment may be needed after seven days

Itching may continue for weeks after treatment. This doesn't mean the treatment failed, it is a reaction to the mites and their waste. If new symptoms appear, consult your doctor.

Children and adults can usually return to school, daycare or work 24 hours after treatment begins.