

Scabies

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is scabies?

Scabies is a treatable skin condition caused by an infestation of tiny mites (*Sarcoptes scabiei*). These mites burrow under the skin to lay their eggs which can cause significant itchiness.

Scabies is a fairly common infestation that can affect individuals of all ages, races, and socioeconomic status.

How is it transmitted?

Scabies is transmitted through prolonged, direct physical contact. Most often scabies is transmitted from the infested individual to family members or sexual partners. Although it is uncommon, scabies can spread through clothing, bedding, or towels in advanced cases.

Individuals with scabies are contagious from the time of infestation until treatment is completed.

What are the symptoms?

The hallmark of scabies infection is intense itching, particularly at night. The itchiness is due to a reaction to the mite itself, not a bite. Itching may not start until 3 to 6 weeks after the initial infestation which makes transmission prevention difficult. Scabies also causes a rash consisting of small, red bumps. Sometimes linear, thin burrows may also be visible.

Common rash locations include:

- Webs between fingers
- Armpits
- Skinfolds of wrists, elbows, knees
- Waist
- Genitals
- Bottoms of feet

How is scabies diagnosed?

Official diagnosis is made by visualizing the mite under microscopy but this is often difficult to do. Most of the time, an individual is diagnosed with scabies based on their history, physical examination, and any known scabies contacts.

How is it treated?

Scabies is most often treated with a prescribed topical cream called permethrin (Elimite).

To use permethrin:

- Apply to skin from neck to bottoms of feet.
- Let cream absorb; only wash off after 8 to 14 hours.
 - May be best to keep the cream on overnight while sleeping.
 - Generally one application is all that is needed.

There are a few other less common alternatives your provider may discuss with you depending on your particular circumstances.

The itchiness and rash may persist for up to 4 weeks after treatment for scabies is complete. This does not necessarily represent treatment failure. It is mostly likely due to a continued hypersensitivity

reaction. An over-the-counter antihistamine like diphenhydramine (Benadryl), loratadine (Claritin), or cetirizine (Zyrtec) may provide itching relief.

There are several additional measures you can take to prevent reinfestation.

- Wash all clothing, bedding, towels, or cloth accessories (canvas bags, etc.) used in the past 4 days. Make sure to use hot water.
- Dry all articles in a hot dryer.
- If there are articles that cannot be washed, place in a sealed plastic bag for 3 days.
- Thoroughly clean and vacuum all living spaces.
- Dry cleaning can also kill mites on articles that are “unwashable.”

NOTE: All cohabitants and sexual partners should be treated, whether they have symptoms or not. Treatment should be completed all at the same time.