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Scabies

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What is scabies?

Scabies is a disease of the skin caused by a mite. Scabies mites burrow into the skin producing pimple-like irritations or burrows. This is called an 'infestation'.

What are the symptoms of scabies?

The most common symptom of scabies is intense itching, especially at night. A sign of infestation includes small raised red bumps, blisters or rashes. The areas of the skin most often affected by scabies include the webs and sides of the fingers, around the wrists, elbows, armpits, waist, thighs, genitalia, breasts and lower buttocks. People with scabies sometimes develop skin infections due to scratching – signs and symptoms of skin infections include redness, warmth, pain/tenderness, swelling and pus at the site of infection.

Who gets scabies?

Anyone can have a scabies infestation. Scabies can affect people of any age, gender, race or level of cleanliness. Even if a person has had a scabies infestation before, a person can be infested again if they are exposed to the mites. Outbreaks of scabies may occur in nursing homes, institutions and child care centers.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The first time a person gets scabies, the itching begins in two to six weeks. If a person has had scabies before, he or she is more sensitive and symptoms appear much more quickly, often within one to four days.

Is scabies contagious?

Scabies mites are spread from one person to another during direct skin-to-skin contact, including sexual contact. The mite does not jump from one person to another. However, indirect transfer of mites in undergarments, sheets or blankets can occur if these articles have been contaminated by an infested person immediately beforehand.

A person is able to spread scabies until the mites and eggs are killed by treatment.

How is scabies diagnosed?

A physician can diagnose scabies by looking at skin scrapings under a microscope. Applying ink to the skin also can help the doctor identify scabies burrows.

What is the treatment for scabies?

Skin lotions containing permethrin, lindane or crotamiton are available by prescription for the treatment of scabies. Medications should be used exactly as described by your healthcare provider. Fingernails should be trimmed and cleaned under to remove any mites or eggs. Persons who have had skin contact with an infested person (including family members, roommates, and sexual contacts) should also be treated at the same time as the infested person. Sometimes, itching may persist for as long as 2-3 weeks after effective treatment. Antihistamine or steroid medicines may reduce the itching. Skin infections may require antibiotic therapy.

The clothing of persons infested with scabies and worn within 48 hours of treatment, and their bed linens, should be washed in hot water and dried in a hot dryer. Articles that cannot be washed may be dry-cleaned, or bagged in plastic for seven days.

Can scabies be prevented?

Avoid direct physical contact with infested people and their belongings, especially clothing and bedding, until 24 hours after treatment. To prevent further spread, persons with scabies should not attend school or day care, or be at the workplace, until the day after treatment

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