

New York State Department of Health

Scabies

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is scabies?

Scabies is a fairly common infectious disease of the skin caused by a mite. Scabies mites burrow into the skin producing pimple-like irritations or burrows.

Who gets scabies?

Scabies infestations can affect people from all socioeconomic levels without regard to age, sex, race or standards of personal hygiene. Clusters of cases, or outbreaks, are occasionally seen in nursing homes, institutions and child care centers.

How is scabies spread?

Scabies mites are transferred by direct skin-to-skin contact. Indirect transfer from undergarments or bedclothes can occur only if these have been contaminated by infected people immediately beforehand. Scabies can also be transmitted during sexual contact.

What are the symptoms of scabies?

The most prominent symptom of scabies is intense itching particularly at night. The areas of the skin most affected by scabies include the webs and sides of the fingers, around the wrists, elbows and armpits, waist, thighs, genitalia, nipples, breasts and lower buttocks.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms will appear from two to six weeks in people who have not previously been exposed to scabies infestations. People who have had a previous bout with scabies mites may show symptoms within one to four days after subsequent re-exposures.

When and for how long is a person able to spread scabies?

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

What is the treatment for scabies?

Skin lotions containing permethrin, lindane or crotamiton are available through a physician's prescription for the treatment of scabies. The lotions are applied to the whole body except the head and neck. Sometimes, itching may persist but should not be regarded as treatment failure or reinfestation. Persons who have had skin contact with an infested person (including family members, roommates, direct care providers and sexual contacts) should also be treated.

What can be done to prevent the spread of scabies?

Avoid physical contact with infested individuals and their belongings, especially clothing and bedding. Health education on the life history of scabies, proper treatment and the need for early diagnosis and treatment of infested individuals and contacts is extremely important.

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