



August 2011

Community and Health Services Department

Scabies

What is Scabies?

Scabies is a highly contagious parasitic infestation of the skin caused by a tiny and usually not directly visible parasite, the mite. The mite is translucent, small, oval, flat in appearance, and usually only seen under a microscope. It burrows under the person's skin, causing intense allergic itching. It commonly occurs in young children and the elderly.

Although more often associated with crowding, homelessness and institutionalization, scabies occurs worldwide in both genders, at all ages and among all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Symptoms of Scabies

Scabies may appear as a raised rash, pustules (a pimple containing pus), scales, lesions, nodules or excoriation (peeling of the skin). It commonly affects the hands, wrists, elbows, skin folds, feet, buttocks, abdomen, breasts, genitals and the head. Tiny burrows are sometimes seen on the skin. Babies and people with weakened immune systems may be infected over any part of the body. The mites avoid areas of skin with calluses or thick hair. Itching may be severe and intense, and is typically worse at night. The allergy-type symptoms continue for some days, and even several weeks, after all mites are killed. Often, symptoms are not experienced until the mite population increases, which may take up to six weeks. The time shortens if a person has been previously infected and can occur within as little as 24 hours.

Crusted scabies, formerly known as "Norwegian scabies" is a more severe form of the infection and is often associated with people with weakened immune systems.

How Scabies spreads

The mite can crawl at a rate of 2.5 cm per minute on warm, moist skin and can survive for 24 to 36 hours at room temperature and average humidity and remain capable of infesting people.

An infected person can spread scabies during the time before symptoms appear. People can get scabies from objects such as clothing, bedding, furniture, or surfaces with which a person infected with scabies might have come in contact. It is most often spread by direct skin-to-skin contact with infected persons over a prolonged period of time. It also can be spread by scratching an infected area, thereby picking up the mites under the fingernails. Scabies is spread easily to sexual partners and household members.

On a person, scabies mites can live for as long as one to two months. They can survive without a human host for 24 to 36 hours. Scabies mites will die if exposed to a temperature of 500°C (1220F) for 10 minutes.

For further information, please call:
York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653
TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit www.york.ca

Treating Scabies

See your doctor immediately if you have any signs and symptoms of scabies. The doctor may prescribe a special topical skin medication. You should read and follow the directions carefully on all medications and you may wish to consult the pharmacist for more information. It is also important that anyone that you have had direct contact with (even if they don't have symptoms) should be treated at the same time, particularly other household members.

Children and adults usually can return to child care, school, or work the day after treatment.

If Itchiness Continues After Treatment

Itching should gradually decrease over the next several weeks after starting medication. If the itchiness continues, it may not necessarily be an indication of drug failure or re-infestation. It may be due to irritation from the medicated lotion or healing of the skin lesions. Do not over medicate and only take as directed, otherwise it may lead to possible drug side effects.

You may apply cool compresses (e.g., damp towel with cold water) for five to 10 minutes as this may relieve itchiness. You may wish to see your doctor if the itchiness continues. If there is evidence of continued infestation, such as a raised rash, treatment needs to be repeated.

Preventing Recurrences

To prevent scabies from occurring again, the following precautions should be taken:

- Extend treatment to include all household, institutional and sexual contacts. Sign and symptoms of scabies infection may appear as late as two months after initial exposure.
- Wash clothing, bed sheets and towels used by the affected person in the 48 hours before and during treatment. It is important to use the hot cycles in the washer and dryer.
- Store clothing which cannot be washed in plastic bags for at least one week
- Vacuum carpets
- Aggressive control of outbreaks of zoonotic scabies with the potential for human transmission by the sarcoptid mites of various domestic animals especially cats, dogs, camels, pigs and horses

Preventing Scabies

There is no vaccine to prevent scabies. It is important to have good personal hygiene including:

- Avoid having close skin to skin contact with individuals known to have scabies
- Do not wear clothes that have been worn by other people
- Do not share your clothes with other people
- Use clean towels after showering
- Perform frequent hand washing

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