

Health Facts

Emergency Department

Scabies

What causes scabies?

Scabies is caused by a small, eight legged mite called *Sarcoptes Scabiei*. They are tiny mites that live on human skin and burrow into the skin to lay and hatch their eggs. They are often very hard to see.

How is it spread?

Scabies is spread by close physical contact. It is common in school age children. The mites and their eggs may live on clothes and bed linen for one to two days. It does not take long for the eggs to hatch and the new mites to grow. Scabies numbers build up quite rapidly and it may take only about three weeks for a few mites to multiply. However, an itch may take up to two months to develop.

How is it diagnosed?

The doctor usually diagnoses scabies by looking at the rash and asking about the itchiness. You might also be asked whether other family members have similar symptoms. This might help the doctor make a diagnosis.

Signs and Symptoms

These may vary and the signs can be very subtle.

- Papules – solid, raised areas of skin with distinct borders less than 1cm in diameter
- Pustules – raised, fluid filled spots that appear yellow
- Vesicles – raised, clear fluid filled spots
- Bullae – raised, clear fluid filled spots or lesions that are bigger than one cm in diameter
- A number of mites burrow into the skin, particularly between the fingers, around the wrists and elbows, the armpit, nipples and penis. In infants and young children, vesicles and pustules may be seen on the palms of hands and soles of feet and sometimes on the scalp.
- Sometimes the only symptom is an itch without a rash. Usually the itch is worse at night and after a hot bath or shower.

Treatment

A number of medications are available for the treatment of scabies. Your doctor will advise you which is the most appropriate to use. It is important that you follow the manufacturer's instructions that come with the lotion or cream.

Remember

- Bathe your child in warm water as hot water may make the itch worse.
- Eggs and mites on the skin as well as on clothes and sheets have to be killed.
- If one person in the house gets scabies everyone in the house can get them. Everyone in the house must have treatment for scabies on the same day.
- Any close friends or contacts (e.g. babysitters, grandparents) that your child has had recent contact with should also be treated.

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- Sheets and clothes must all be washed thoroughly in hot water. Dry them in the sun if possible. For clothes and linen where this is not possible items should be ironed or stored in a plastic bag for 72 hours.
- Children can go back to school when the treatment has been started.

When to see your doctor

The itching may take up to a week or more to resolve after treatment. If the rash does not go away or breaks out again, or if you are concerned, take your child to the GP or emergency department.