

Scabies

Scabies is a skin disease caused by an almost invisible organism, the "itch mite" (*sarcoptes scabiei*). This disease has plagued humans for thousands of years. By the 1950's, the incidence of scabies declined rapidly to the point where one medical dictionary defined it as an organism "now extinct. In recent years, however, scabies has been making a vigorous comeback. No one really knows why. All we know is that the mites seem to come and go in cycles that are currently unexplainable. If you are diagnosed with scabies, do not be embarrassed. Scabies is a common condition that your health care provider can treat.

CONTRACTING SCABIES

Scabies is easily acquired and highly contagious. Virtually anyone can get scabies. Scabies often spreads among school children quite rapidly, due to their close contact. In addition, family members, roommates, and sexual partners are all candidates for spread of an infestation.

Usually scabies spreads by direct skin-to-skin contact with another person who is infested. Handholding or simply shaking hands can result in scabies being transmitted from one individual to another. Exchanging clothing and sharing a bed or towels are also means of spreading scabies. The scabies mite does not "jump" from one person to another and does not survive very long in clothing or linens.

DETECTION

The female mite burrows into the outermost layer of skin where she lays eggs daily. In a few days the eggs hatch and the six-legged larvae travel to the surface of the skin. Here, the larvae transform into immature mites. When the female mite reaches maturity, she mates, burrows into the skin, and the cycle repeats. The male mite dies after mating; the female dies after her egg-laying is completed, usually five weeks after reaching adulthood.

Your primary care provider will look on the surface of your skin. Mites burrow in spaces between fingers, on the back of hands and elbows, and under other areas affected including armpits, the breasts, groin, back, buttocks or along the belt line.

It is extremely difficult to see mites without the aid of a magnifying glass since they are just 1/60 of an inch in length. The linear zigzag burrows that they make are just below the surface of the skin and are often quite visible to the naked eye.

To find out whether or not you have scabies, see your primary care provider. A red, itchy rash, typical of scabies, is very common in other skin disorders, too. If it looks like scabies, your health care provider may want to confirm the diagnosis by scraping a few tiny specks of skin from the itchy area, placing the specimen on a slide, and examining it under a microscope. If you have never had scabies before, it may have taken four to six weeks from the time you contracted scabies for the symptoms to emerge. In addition to the linear burrows that appear between the fingers, on the elbows, hands, wrists, or other susceptible areas, intense itching occurs, particularly at night. Although the itch is uncomfortable, avoid scratching, since this can lead to other infection and delay healing.

There is no immunity to scabies. However, with a second infestation the symptoms show up much faster. Itching begins within a few hours after contracting the mites. See your primary care provider for the proper diagnosis and recommendations for care if any new rash develops.

PREVENTION

The practice of good personal hygiene is essential in preventing a scabies infestation. Below are some general prevention tips:

- Wash your hands often.
- Shampoo your hair frequently.
- Wear clean clothes daily. Do not exchange clothes with others.
- Be checked by a primary care provider immediately if you have been exposed to someone with scabies.
- Do not use the same bedding or clothing as the affected person.

TREATMENT

The treatment is effective and easy to apply. Your health care provider will prescribe a lotion to use according to directions. The treatment is effective and scabies is usually gone within 12 hours. The itch may last as long as two or three weeks.

It is important to uncontaminated your living space. Wash all clothing and bed linens with hot water and detergent. Dry in dryer at hottest setting for fabric. Bag all items unable to be washed for 3 days. Vacuum thoroughly and discard vacuum bag into a sealed plastic bag. Treat all household members at the same time.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of services. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

CDC

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/scabies/factsht_scabies.htm

Public Health

<http://www.metrokc.gov/health/prevcont/scabies.htm>

Medline PLUS

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000830.htm>