



Scabies: Prevention and treatment

Scabies is an infectious skin condition caused by a tiny mite which burrows into the skin and causes intense itching.

It is spread mainly through direct skin contact with an infected person and occasionally by contaminated bedding, towels and clothes.

What is scabies?

Scabies is an infectious skin condition caused by the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*. The mite is tiny (around 0.2-0.4mm long) and cannot be properly identified without magnification. The female mite is able to burrow under the skin where it lays eggs.

The mite tends to burrow where there is a natural crease in the skin such as the hands, webbing between the fingers, wrists, elbows, armpits, groin, buttocks, and waistline. In men, the genitals may be affected and in women the area surrounding the nipple.

Evidence of a scabies infestation can include the presence of burrows that appear as a greyish-coloured fine line or curve around 5mm in length.

Small red bumps are often present near the burrow entrance, but may also occur on other parts of the body. These areas can be itchy due to an allergic reaction or sensitivity to the mite or its waste products. Itchiness often increases when the body is warm; for example, after a hot bath or shower or while in bed.

Scabies is not an indication of poor hygiene and occurs regardless of social class, age or ethnic group.

Is scabies a serious condition?

Scabies can be very annoying because of the intense itching it causes, but there is no evidence that the mite can spread other infections. Severe or prolonged scratching due to scabies can result in secondary bacterial infections that may require additional treatment.

How is scabies diagnosed?

Scabies is diagnosed by the presence of typical mite burrows or through microscopic examination of skin scrapings for the presence of mites, their eggs or faeces. There are many causes of itching besides scabies, so diagnosis needs to be done by a health professional such as a GP or dermatologist.

It is important that scabies is clinically diagnosed to limit unnecessary exposure to chemicals in treatment products.

How is scabies spread?

Scabies is spread mainly through direct skin contact with an infected person and occasionally by contaminated bedding, towels and clothes.

In ideal conditions, particularly warm environments, scabies mites can survive for up to four days away from a human host, so it is important that



Public Health Fact Sheet

contaminated items are thoroughly washed at the time of treatment.

The allergic reaction to the scabies mite may take a month or more to develop after the first exposure. Recently infested people may not itch at all for a couple of weeks.

All close family, friends and sexual contacts must be treated at the same time (regardless of whether they show symptoms) to prevent further spread or reinfestation.

Can scabies be caught from pets?

Pets such as dogs and cats can be infested with a different type of scabies mite which causes a condition called 'mange'.

Although this mite can spread to humans, it is unable to reproduce on the human body and is therefore a self-limiting condition.

Both the infested animal and its bedding should be treated with a veterinary approved insecticidal product.

How is scabies treated?

There are several treatment options available for the treatment of scabies.

The current treatment of choice is a 5% preparation of permethrin (*Lyclear* or *Quellada*) or a 25% preparation of benzyl benzoate (*Ascabiol* or *Benzemu*).*

It is important to discuss treatment options with a health professional before treating infants, pregnant or breastfeeding women, the elderly, or those with pre-existing skin conditions such as eczema or dermatitis.

Treatment

Follow these steps for effective treatment of scabies:

1. Confirm scabies diagnosis with a health professional and discuss the most appropriate treatment preparation (scabicide).
2. Trace and inform all possible close contacts (family members, friends and sexual contacts).
3. Treat all those suspected of being infectious (regardless of symptoms) at the same time.
4. Carefully follow the manufacturer's instructions for the use of the scabicide, including steps you need to take before and after application.
5. Before removing the scabicide, wash all contaminated bedding, towels and clothes in hot water (at least 60oC) and/or heated tumble drying or ironing.
6. Items that cannot be washed should be dry-cleaned or placed in a sealed plastic bag for 5 days to kill any mites or eggs. Mattresses and upholstered furniture can be vacuumed or gently ironed to remove mites/eggs.
7. Repeat the application of scabicide in 5-7 days and follow the manufacturer's instructions.
8. Follow-up with a health professional after one month to ensure that treatment was successful (or earlier if you are concerned).

* Disclaimer: Use of trade names is for identification only and does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Health.

Public Health Fact Sheet

NOTE: The itchiness associated with scabies can often take several weeks to stop completely following treatment. Continued itching during this period does not necessarily mean that the scabies treatment has failed.

Controlling the spread

Any unexplained itching or rash may indicate a scabies infestation.

Obtaining prompt medical diagnosis and treatment will limit the extent to which scabies is spread.

Ensuring that all people in close contact and contaminated items such as bedding and clothing are treated will also help control the spread.

Children and adults expected to have close contact with others such as nurses and carers, should stay home from school or work until the day after treatment.

Crusted (Norwegian) scabies

Crusted scabies is severe form of scabies in which thousands to millions of mites infest an individual (most scabies cases involve only 10 to 20 mites).

People affected by crusted scabies often have a poor or compromised immune system or have been misdiagnosed leading to a delay in treatment.

Crusted scabies results in intense crusting and scaling of the skin, although the itch generally associated with scabies may be mild or absent.

As crusted scabies can be very contagious, it is important that specialised scabies treatment is carried out in consultation with a health professional.

Further information

- Contact your local council Environmental Health Officer
- Contact the Department of Health on 8226-7100 or go to our website:

www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environmental-health-index.htm

Contact

Applied Environmental Health
Public Health
SA Health

1st floor, Citi Centre Building
11 Hindmarsh Square
Adelaide SA 5000

PO Box 6, Rundle Mall
Adelaide SA 5000

Tel 08 8226 7100

Fax 08 8226 7102

ABN 97 643 356 590

Email: public.health@health.sa.gov.au

Web: www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environmental-health-index.htm

© Department of Health,
Government of South Australia.

All rights reserved.

Last revised October 2008

