

Patient information

Scabies

What causes scabies?

Scabies is caused by a mite (a tiny insect). The female mite tunnels a little into the skin and lays eggs. The eggs hatch into mites after a few days. The mites will not harm you; they just cause intense itching.

How do you get scabies?

You need close skin-to-skin contact with an infected person to catch scabies. The mites live in skin but die after a short time if they are away from the skin.

Most cases are probably caught from holding hands with an infected person. The hand is the most common site to be first affected. Sleeping in the same bed and close contact are other common ways of passing on the mite.

Sometimes outbreaks of scabies occur in residential homes or hospitals where people are in close contact.

What are the symptoms of scabies?

An Itch that is often severe. Itchy skin tends to be in one area at first (often the hands), and then spreads to other parts of the body. The itch tends to be worse at night and after a hot bath.

A rash usually appears soon after the itch starts. It is typically a blotchy red rash that can appear anywhere on the body. It is often most obvious on the inside of the thighs, parts of the abdomen, and the ankles.

Mite tunnels (burrows) may be seen on the skin as fine, dark, or silvery lines about 2-10 mm long. The most common areas where they occur are the loose skin between the fingers, the front of wrists and elbows, armpits, under breasts, the groin, scrotum, and penis.

Scratching sometimes causes slight skin damage. In some cases, the damaged skin becomes infected by bacteria - a 'secondary' skin infection. Skin infected with bacteria becomes red, inflamed, hot and tender.

The itch and rash of scabies are due to an allergy to the mites. These symptoms usually take 2 - 6 weeks to occur after you are infected (as the allergy develops). During this time, you may be unaware that you are infected, and you can easily pass the mites to others before you show any symptoms.

Some people believe that they are 'covered in mites'. This is usually not so. Commonly there are just a few mites on the skin. The allergy to mites can however cause you to itch all over, and for a rash to appear on many parts of the body.

Who should be treated?

The affected person **should be treated** together with:

- Anyone living in the same household
- Anyone who has been sleeping with or had intimate relations with the affected person.

It is important to treat based on contact, not symptoms. This is because it can take up to 6 weeks to develop symptoms after you become infected. Close contacts may be infected, but have no symptoms, and may pass on the mite.

Everyone who is treated should be treated at the same time.

Bedding, clothing and towels should be machine washed at 60°C on the day of application of first treatment.

What is the treatment for scabies?

The usual treatment is a cream containing **Permethrin** (although sometimes a lotion containing **Malathion is used instead**). These kill the mite. They are easy to apply and normally work well if used properly. The lotion or cream is applied all over the body.

Please Note: the manufacturers leaflet may say not to apply above the neck; however, we now advise that you treat the face, hair, neck and back of the ears.

How to apply the treatment

1. Treatment is best applied before you go to bed to avoid it being removed or washed off during the day.
2. Don't bath or shower before applying the treatment (**allow at least 4 hours to elapse**). Don't scrub the skin first either. All these things increase blood supply to the skin, which then carries the treatment away into the body before it has had a chance to kill all the mites on the skin. If the skin is very dirty, a LUKE WARM bath or shower is okay, so long as the skin is cool and dry before you apply the treatment.
3. If treating babies, put mittens on to stop them sucking the treatment off. You may need to re-apply around the mouth as they sometimes lick it off.
4. Cut finger and toenails short and clean underneath them as mites often live there.
5. Treatment can be applied by using a cotton bud or a very soft toothbrush.
6. If using the cream, you may need two 30-gram tubes per single application. Babies and small children usually need half this amount. If using the lotion, you'll need about 200mls worth per single application.
7. You'll need someone to help apply treatment to places you can't reach like the middle of your back.
8. If using the lotion, pour some into a bowl before applying. You can rub it in with your hands, some cotton wool, or a clean 3" paintbrush (with a smaller one for the fiddly bits!) If you're using cream, squeeze it straight from the tube and gently rub it into the skin with your hands and fingers whilst wearing gloves.
9. You need to apply the treatment over every square inch of skin from head to toe (not just the areas with the rash). The information leaflet that comes with the treatment may only say apply from the neck down, but we now say it is best to treat above the neckline too.
10. Apply treatment around the ears and to the back of the ears, but not right inside them.
11. Next apply the cream/lotion to the face and around the neck. Treat all skin on the face except around the eyes, or inside the mouth or nostrils.
12. Carry on down the body. Don't forget under the armpits, rubbing it in through any underarm hair. Include the nipples, under the breasts, any skin folds, and especially inside the navel (belly button).
13. Apply the treatment right inside the buttocks, around and underneath the genitals. Men should apply treatment to scrotum and penis. Women should treat the outer skin of the vagina (called the labia), but not inside the vagina.
14. Carry on down both legs to the feet including the soles, between the toes and underneath the toenails.
15. Apply to the hands – especially between the fingers and underneath the nails.
16. Leave the treatment on for at least 8 hours and wash off within 12 hours if using the cream, or 24 hours if using the lotion, then wash it off.
17. If you wash or dry any part of your body (e.g. hands/genitalia) you must re-apply the lotion immediately.
18. Even though all the mites are dead, the itching can carry on for a few weeks. You can use Eurax cream or lotion from a pharmacy to help stop the itching.

If you have symptoms of scabies, it is recommended that a further repeat treatment is given again 7 days later using the same cream or lotion. You will have been advised if a further treatment course is necessary when your treatment is prescribed.

How do I treat the itch?

It can take 2-3 weeks for the itch to go completely after the mites have been killed by treatment. A cream or lotion recommended by a pharmacist, may help to treat the itch. An antihistamine medicine such as chlorpheniramine may also be useful to help you sleep if itching is a problem at night. A pharmacist can advise about these.

The itching sometimes gets better if you use moisturisers (the oily ones are more soothing). They work better after a bath or shower, when the skin is still damp.

See a doctor if the itch carries on for longer than 2-3 weeks after treatment. It may be that the cream or lotion hasn't worked, and a different one might be needed. It's more than likely that the cream or lotion will kill the mites, but may not be effective:

- The cream or lotion was not put on correctly or left on for the full time
- The cream or lotion was not re-applied after the hands were washed or after a nappy was changed (in infants)
- A close contact was not treated at the same time, and the infection has been caught again.

After treatment it may take up to 6 weeks for the itching to completely stop. This does not mean the treatment has failed. Itching is a result of an allergic reaction to the mites. Antihistamines may help relieve the itching.

Symptoms with a recurring infection

If you've had scabies before, and then catch it again, the symptoms may be slightly different. The itch and rash tend to develop straight away (as opposed to taking 2-6 weeks to develop when you have a first infection). This is because you are already sensitised to the mite from when you had scabies before. So, your body reacts more quickly with the itch and rash appearing much sooner than after a first infection.

Sources of information

If you have any queries, please discuss with the nursing or medical staff who can contact the Infection Prevention and Control Team for further advice. You can also obtain information from the following NHS website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/scabies/>

Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the patient experience team on 0300 131 4784 or esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net.

Hand hygiene

We are committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Other formats

If you require any of our leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department on 0300 131 4434 or esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

The Clinical Specialty that has agreed this patient information leaflet: Infection Prevention and Control

The directorate group that has agreed this patient information leaflet:
Corporate Nursing

Next review date: June 2026

Responsible clinician/author: Kristina Smith, Infection Prevention and Control Nurse

© East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust – www.esht.nhs.uk