

Scabies Tip Sheet

What is scabies?

Scabies is a skin infestation caused by the parasitic mite *Sarcoptes scabiei* var. *hominis*. An infestation can happen when mites and parasites invade a person's skin. Mites burrow under the top layer of the skin to lay eggs and can live there for 1-2 months. The eggs hatch and become egg-laying adult mites that can continue the infestation until a person is treated. Scabies is contagious, meaning it spreads from person to person through close contact. Scabies is a global problem that can affect anyone.

How does scabies spread?

Scabies is usually spread through direct, long-lasting or frequent skin-to-skin contact with someone who is already infested with scabies mites. Scabies does not usually spread through a brief touch with someone who has scabies, such as a handshake or hug. Scabies usually spreads to sexual partners and household members. Scabies can also spread through contact with the clothes, bedding, or towels of someone who has scabies. Scabies spreads quickly in crowded areas where close body and skin contact is common. Nursing homes or extended-care facilities, childcare facilities, and prisons are common places where scabies outbreaks occur.

What are the signs and symptoms of scabies?

The most common signs and symptoms of scabies are:

- Intense itching, especially at night, that may affect most of the body or be limited to certain areas (see below)
- A rash or skin irritation that looks like red raised bumps, blisters, pimples, or brown nodules
- Mite burrows on the skin with a zigzag or "S" pattern

Common areas of infestation include:

- between the fingers
- armpits
- bends of elbows and knees
- wrists
- breasts
- buttocks
- penis and scrotum
- waist and abdomen



Scabies infestation in webs of fingers



Scabies presenting on abdomen

The head, face, neck, palms of the hands, and soles of the feet are common areas of infestation in infants and young children, but these areas are not usually affected in adults and older children.

People with crusted scabies, a more severe form of scabies, often have thick crusts of skin that contain large numbers (up to 2 million) of scabies mites and eggs. People with crusted scabies often do not show the usual signs and symptoms of scabies and may be misdiagnosed with psoriasis (a scaly rash) or eczema (red, itchy skin).

How long does it take before a person with scabies has symptoms?

In people that have never been infested with scabies before, symptoms (like itching and redness of the skin) usually appear 2 to 6 weeks after coming in contact with someone who has scabies and becomes infested. If a person has been infested with scabies before, they will have symptoms much sooner, usually within 1 to 4 days because previous exposure to scabies will cause an allergic reaction.

If a person has scabies, how long are they contagious?

A person with scabies can pass it on to another person as long as they have not been treated, even if they don't have symptoms. The clothes and bedding of a person with scabies can also be infested with scabies mites until they are properly washed or treated. After treatment, a person may get scabies again without knowing it if they come in contact with someone else who has scabies.

If you have scabies or are being treated for scabies, do not have close or sexual contact with someone until you finish treatment for scabies. Tell your sexual partners and household members if you have scabies so they can be checked and treated if necessary.

Do not have direct, long-lasting contact with partners or household members who have scabies until they have been treated.

How can scabies affect my health?

Scabies usually causes only discomfort and inconvenience. Bacterial infections can come from intense scratching, and this usually requires treatment with antibiotics prescribed by a doctor.

If scabies isn't treated right away, the number of mites under a person's skin can multiply and cause crusted scabies. Older adults and people with weakened immune systems are at greater risk for this more severe form of scabies. Crusted scabies is much more contagious than regular scabies because there are more mites that can easily pass with direct skin-to-skin contact.

How is scabies diagnosed?

A healthcare provider can usually diagnose scabies by looking at the mite burrows or rash on a person's skin. Sometimes, a skin scraping can be used to look for mites or their eggs under a microscope to confirm the diagnosis.

How is scabies treated?

There are no “over-the-counter” products available to treat scabies.

Scabies can be treated with a prescription lotion or cream that is applied to the skin. The recommended treatment for scabies is 5% permethrin cream, though additional medications are available by prescription. It is important to always follow the directions provided on the medication label or by a physician.

Treatment may also be recommended for household members and sexual contacts of a person who has scabies, especially if they had long-lasting, skin-to-skin contact with the infested person. Any household members or sexual contacts should be treated at the same time in order to prevent reinfestation. Retreatment may be needed if itching continues 2 to 4 weeks after treatment, or if new burrows or a rash continue to appear on the skin.

How soon after treatment will someone with scabies feel better?

If treatment is successful, the itching and rash should slowly go away over 2 to 3 weeks. Symptoms may get worse 1 to 2 days after treatment, but if symptoms continue or get worse, or if new rashes are found within 7 to 14 days, it is possible the treatment did not work and the skin should be retested.

If I come in contact with someone who has scabies, should I treat myself?

No. If you think you have scabies, you should talk to a doctor or healthcare provider.

Remember: Scabies does not usually spread from brief contact with someone who has scabies. The longer you have skin-to-skin contact with someone who has scabies, the more likely you are to get scabies from that person. You are much more likely to get scabies after sleeping with or having sex with someone who has scabies than if you hold hands with that person.

What else can I do to get rid of scabies?

All clothes, bedding, and towels used by a person with scabies for the 2 days before treatment should be washed in hot water and dried in a hot dryer or sealed in a plastic bag for 7 days. Mites do not usually live for more than 2 to 3 days off a person.

If a person has crusted scabies, large numbers of mites may be in the environment where that person lives or stays, so vacuuming furniture and carpets in rooms used by the person is recommended. Vacuum bags should be thrown away afterwards.

Fumigation, or pest control using pesticides, in living areas is not necessary.

Additional Instructions for UCSF Healthcare Setting:

Scabies: Private room, **Standard Precautions plus Contact Isolation** until 24 hours after initiation of effective therapy. Routine environmental cleaning for Scabies.

Crusted Scabies: is a severe form requires aggressive, often repeated treatment with both topical and oral medication due to the high number of mites.

- Maintain **Standard Precautions plus Contact Isolation** until skin scrapings are negative and patients are cleared by Dermatology
- If Crusted Scabies is suspected or confirmed, contact HEIP during business hours 415-353-4343 to add a Scabies flag to the chart.
- Environmental Cleaning: *Crusted Scabies only* - order high clean following discharge via EVS ticket.

[Ambulatory Contact Isolation Sign](#)

[Inpatient Contact Isolation Sign](#)

References:

California Department of Public Health Division of Communicable Disease Control:
(<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/CDPH%20Document%20Library/ScabiesEasyRead.pdf>)

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) scabies
(<https://www.cdc.gov/scabies/about/index.html>)

Updated: March 2026