

SCABIES

What is scabies?

Scabies is an infection of the skin caused by a very small insect-like parasite called a mite. The female scabies mite lays her eggs just under the surface of the skin. These eggs hatch in three to four days, and then move out to the surface of the skin where they mature. There they mate and repeat the life cycle, gradually spreading the infestation. Scabies is found worldwide, including New Brunswick.

What are the symptoms?

The most common sign of scabies is persistent, increasingly severe itching, usually four to six weeks after infection. In severe cases, the tiny, grey-white scabies "burrows" can sometimes be seen. They look like wavy, raised threads just under the skin surface. A red rash will accompany the itchiness.

The most common rash sites include the webs between the fingers, the insides of the wrists and elbows, the breasts, the male genitals, the abdomen, the back, and buttocks. Scabies is rarely found above the neck, except in infants.

How is scabies spread?

Scabies is usually spread by direct skin-to-skin contact with an infected person. Exchanging clothes and towels or sharing a bed is less common ways of contracting scabies. Some people are embarrassed to discover they have scabies, even though it can be caught by anyone and does not indicate poor personal hygiene.

How is scabies diagnosed?

Because itching and skin rashes have many causes, only your doctor can say for sure if you have scabies. Your doctor does this by looking at a tiny sample of skin scrapings under the microscope.

Who is at risk of infection?

Anyone exposed to the mites can develop scabies; however, the young, the elderly and persons with weakened immune systems are at a greater risk of developing more serious disease.

How can scabies be prevented?

Scabies is prevented by avoiding direct skin to skin contact with an infected person or with items such as clothing and bedding from an infected person. If one person in your family has scabies there is a good chance that others will have it too and may not yet have symptoms. For this reason all household members should be treated, ideally at the same time.

How are scabies infections treated?

There are a number of lotions or creams that can be obtained from pharmacies. It is important to read the label carefully and follow directions.

Remember to put on clean clothes and bedding after the treatment. Launder all recently used clothing, towels, kitchen linens and bed linens in hot water and detergent. Any clothing that cannot be laundered should be stored for at least three days before re-using. You don't have to disinfect such items as mattresses and furniture, but it is a good idea to give your house a thorough vacuuming, including soft or upholstered furniture. Scabies mites do not survive more than two to three days away from human skin.

What is the Public Health response?

If you have been diagnosed with scabies it is important to tell household members so they can also be tested.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, local Public Health office or Tele-Care 811.