

# Scabies

Scabies is an infestation of the skin caused by the scabies mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*. The mite is very tiny, 0.2-0.4mm long, and cannot easily be seen without magnification. It occurs worldwide and in all races and social classes. Scabies is not an indication of poor hygiene.

Scabies and other mites usually infest the skin especially where there are creases, such as between the fingers (colour plate no. 17), on the front of the wrists and in the folds of the elbows, armpits, buttocks and genitals. When mites have been transmitted from animals (such as dogs) to people, the mites are commonly found on areas of skin having contact with the animal, including forearms, chest and neck. However, mites from animals cannot breed on humans, so do not cause ongoing infestation. Scabies mites cause intense itching, especially at night. Thread-like 'tunnels', approximately 10mm long, may be visible as grey lines in the skin, but they are often difficult to detect. Scabies infection may appear on the genitals as small itchy lumps.

Scabies and other mites that cause skin disease are diagnosed by examining skin scrapings with a microscope.

Scabies is usually transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact, or rarely, by underwear or bed clothes that have been freshly contaminated by an infested person. The mites can survive for only a few days off the human or animal body.

## Incubation period

*(time between becoming infested and developing symptoms)*

Itching begins 2 – 6 weeks after infestation in individuals not previously exposed to scabies and within 1 – 5 days for individuals previously exposed.

## Contagious period

*(time during which an infested person can transmit the infestation to others)*

Until the mites and eggs are destroyed by treatment. People can be contagious even before the itching begins.

## Treatment

Skin disease caused by mites can easily be confused with other skin diseases. Treatment should not be undertaken until the diagnosis has been confirmed by a doctor, following examination of skin scrapings for mites. This is particularly important for babies, pregnant women or people who already have other forms of skin disease. Babies under 12 months of age need special treatment. Treatment involves application of insecticidal cream, lotion or solution as prescribed by a doctor.

## Control of spread

- > People with mites should be excluded from child care, preschool, school or work and may return on the day following treatment.
- > All close (skin-to-skin) contacts and other people in the same household should be treated at the same time, even if no itching or other symptoms are present. By the time scabies is diagnosed in one person, many other people may have been infested. If everyone is not treated at the same time, treatment is likely to be unsuccessful.
- > Contaminated underwear, bed linen and other clothing worn by infested persons in the 48 hours prior to treatment should be washed with hot water and detergent. All items such as toys which cannot be washed or dry-cleaned should be placed in a plastic bag for four days to kill any mites or eggs.
- > Mattresses and upholstered furniture can be vacuumed or gently ironed.

## Useful website

- > **Scabies**  
<http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/topics/topic-scabies.htm>