



A Union of Professionals

Health and Safety Program

SCABIES

What is Scabies?

Scabies is a disease of the skin caused by mites that burrow beneath the skin and lay their eggs. The burrows cause sores (lesions), especially visible around finger webs, wrists, bend of elbows, belt line, thighs, stomach and lower part of buttocks.

How is Scabies Transmitted?

Scabies can be passed from residents or patients to workers through direct skin-to-skin contact, during activities such as sponge-bathing patients or applying body lotions--or just holding hands. Other possible exposure may come through worker contact with soiled bedclothes and undergarments freshly contaminated by infected persons.

What is the Time Between Exposure and Onset of Symptoms (Incubation)?

The incubation period of scabies is usually two to six weeks for persons with no previous exposure. Persons who have been previously exposed develop symptoms in one to four days.

What Are the Symptoms of Scabies?

Intense itching is the primary symptom; it is usually worse at night. Scratching may lead to infection of sores.

What is the Treatment for Scabies?

Infested persons should first bathe and then apply a one percent gamma benzene hexachloride (Kwell), crotamiton (Eurax) and tetraethylthuran monosulfide (Tetmosol) in a five percent solution twice daily or an emulsion of benzyl benzoate to the whole body. These substances can cause irritation to the skin; after treatment, another bath should be taken to remove these substances. Itching may persist for one to two weeks after the treatment, but itching is not necessarily a sign of re-infestation with scabies. Avoid overtreatment with these substances or with pesticides; they are toxic and can cause adverse health effects in high concentrations. If you suspect that you still have scabies, you can repeat the first treatment seven to 10 days later (this will kill any newly hatched scabies mites).

Who Else Should Be Concerned if I Have Scabies?

The family members of workers who have scabies, and anyone who has skin contact with patients with scabies, should also be treated as described above.

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What Steps Can I Take to Prevent Scabies Infection?

1. Avoid skin-to-skin contact with patients until 24 hours after the patient has been treated. Gloves should be worn when caring for patients.
2. Wash your hands immediately after touching the patient, any bedding or garments.
3. Discard all contaminated articles, or bag and label articles before sending to the laundry or to other decontamination and reprocessing departments. Plastic bags that dissolve in hot water and which can be directly loaded into washing machines are recommended for use with linen.
4. Alert family members who have visited patients to potential scabies infestation and proper treatment measures.

How Should I Alert Other Workers to a Possible Scabies Infection?

As soon as a scabies infestation is identified, management should alert workers and post concise and detailed instruction cards in the vicinity of the patient (on the door to the room; at the foot or head of the bed). All important isolation precautions should be listed on this card. Once workers have been informed about an infectious patient, it is their responsibility to follow all precautions outlined by management. In many patient care activities, workers can decrease the risk of acquiring infection by careful hand washing.

What Worker Training Should Occur to Help Prevent the Spread of Scabies?

The Centers for Disease Control strongly recommends that healthcare facilities train workers in infection control. Clearly written guidelines, policies and procedures should be available at all times to all workers.

For more information, contact the AFT Healthcare Occupational Safety and Health Program at 202/393-5674.