

# **SCABIES**

## ***What is scabies?***

Scabies is a skin disease caused by an eight-legged bug known as the “human itch mite” (*Scarcoptes scabiei*). These creatures are too small to be seen by the naked eye. They exist by burrowing into and eating the top layers of human skin. Actually, only female mites do the burrowing; they lay eggs and deposit dried fecal pellets behind them as they go. The males spend their lives wandering over the skin looking for a burrowed-in female to mate with. Fertilized eggs hatch inside the mother’s burrow about 4 days after fertilization. The immature mites develop into adults in about 1 week. Many authorities believe mature mites can live up to 2 weeks without being attached to a human. During this time, they may hide out in clothing, bed linens, sleeping bags etc.

## ***How do you get scabies?***

In general, you become infected through personal contact with someone who is infected with a female mite. Most cases probably result from prolonged, intimate contact with an infected person, though some may occur when exposed to infected clothing, bed linen, etc.

In the past, scabies was called “the 7 year itch” because it could be very persistent, if untreated. Today the preferred treatment is careful application of a chemical called permethrin sold as a prescription cream, named “Elimite.”

### *To use Elimite to treat scabies in adults and children:*

Massage it into the skin from head to toes. Scabies rarely infests the scalp of adults, although the hairline, neck, temple, and forehead may be infested in infants and the elderly. Don’t miss a single part of the skin surface, or it may fail to cure you of the condition. Avoid genital openings. Put on clean clothes and change sheets and towels. The cream should be removed by washing after 8 to 14 hours. Infants should be treated on the scalp, temple and forehead. One application is usually enough.

This course of treatment cures most cases. **DO NOT USE MORE ELIMITE THAN RECOMMENDED; THE MEDICATION ITSELF CAN IRRITATE THE SKIN.**

## ***So what do I do about it?***

- 1) See a dermatologist as soon as possible to begin treatment. Remember, you may be disgusted by the thought of bugs, but scabies is no reflection on your personal cleanliness.
- 2) Treat everybody exposed whether they are obviously infested or not. Incubation time is 6-8 weeks so symptoms may not show up right away. If you don’t treat everyone, it is as if you were never treated.
- 3) Apply treatment from head to toes. If you wash your hands after application, you need to reapply the medication to your hands.
- 4) Wash all personal items. The mite is attracted to scent. Clean clothes in closets or drawers are ok. Towels and bedding should be washed in a washing machine right away. Nothing needs to be boiled.
- 5) Items you don’t want to wash may be put in the dryer on hot for 30 minutes or dry-cleaned.
- 6) Rid or R&C spray may be used on things you can’t launder like belts, shoes, purses, etc.
- 7) Pets do not have to be treated.
- 8) Itching can continue for 2 or more weeks after successful treatment of the mite.
- 9) Other things can also be put in a plastic bag and put in the garage or a storage area for 2 weeks. If the mites don’t get fed in a week, they usually die.
- 10) Vacuum your entire living space.

## ***And don’ts?***

- Don’t attempt to treat scabies with home remedies. Scrubbing with laundry detergent or hard soaps will only make it worse.
- Don’t use steroids or any other cream unless prescribed by a dermatologist.
- Don’t repeat the treatment more than twice unless specifically told to by a dermatologist.

Unfortunately, the intense itch associated with scabies may last several weeks. Nobody is quite sure why, but it may be because some infected people develop an allergy to the mite’s body during the course of the disease.

Elimite kills mites but leaves their dead bodies intact inside the burrows where they are later digested by white blood cells. The itch may persist following treatment because of dead mites, which may not have been digested. Calamine lotion or cortisone cream may provide relief during this time.

If you have been diagnosed with scabies and followed the above directions, but think you **still** have scabies, make an appointment to see a medical provider. As is true of many parasitic diseases, the management of scabies sometimes taxes the clinician and the patient alike, but properly treated, the disease **is** curable.

*A service of the Klotz Student Health Center's Health Promotion Dept.*

For more information,  
please call 818 677-3666 or 677-3692 (tty)  
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Adapted from the Cowell Student Health Center, UC Santa Cruz.

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