

Scabies

Scabies is caused by the scabies mite. The mites, tiny in size, live in tunnels that they burrow into the skin. The scabies mite is a parasite found only in humans. Itching and a pimple-like rash are caused by sensitisation to the mites and their secretions. Scabies is still common.

Symptoms

The most common symptom is itching, which is at its worst in the evening and during the night. There are small or larger pimples on the skin as well as skin breakdown caused by scratching. As a rule, the areas where symptoms are most commonly seen are the fingers and wrists, the elbow creases and armpits, the buttocks and feet. Small blisters and pustules are relatively common. Thin, winding burrows 5 mm in length are most commonly found on the wrists and between the fingers. Crusted scabies that covers the entire skin surface may develop in the elderly and in people suffering from an immune deficiency. In young children and old people, scabies may also spread to the scalp.

Transmission

The scabies mite spreads through close skin-to-skin contact from one person to another. The infection is contracted through sexual activity or from family members. Scabies spreads more easily among groups of people, such as children in day care or old people in nursing homes. Outbreaks occur in care facilities, in which case, both nursing staff and patients' families may become infected. A short contact, such as shaking hands, does not usually lead to a transmission of infection. Scabies mites are not able to survive outside the human body for more than 24 hours, which is why scabies is very rarely transmitted through bedding.

Incubation time

After infection with scabies mites, there is a symptom-free period of 2–4 weeks. Towards the end of this period, scabies may already be transmitted from one person to another. In the case of a recurring infection, the symptom-free period is shorter. In some cases, scabies may present with no or only mild itching.

Diagnosis

A definite diagnosis requires the identification of burrows in the skin made by the mites. The doctor or nurse may find a mite at the end of the burrow, extract it with a pin, and place it under a microscope.

Treatment

Treatment consists of medication targeting the scabies mite, changing the clothing worn and bedding used, and treating the person who infected you and people who may have been infected by you. A repeat application of medication after one week is necessary to ensure the effect of the treatment. All family members are treated at the same time twice.

Returning to work/school is allowed 24 hours after completion of treatment as instructed.

Anti-scabies medication

Medication for scabies comprises permethrin cream (Nix®), available over the counter, ivermectin tablets (Scatol®), available by prescription, and sulfur-Vaseline cream (an extemporaneous preparation).

Nix® cream (permethrin; 30 g tube)

Apply the cream on clean, dry skin, from the tips of your toes to the tip of your chin, to your neck and around your ears. In small children and old people, apply to the scalp and face as well. Pay extra attention when applying the cream between the fingers and toes, around the fingernails, in the navel, armpits and groin, and the genital area. The duration of action is 8–15 hours in adults and 6–8 hours in young children. The average amount of cream needed for one treatment is indicated on the package label. For babies, the duration of treatment is determined by the doctor.

To boost the effect of the cream, wear a long-sleeved T-shirt and track pants or similar. Wear cotton socks with the pant legs tucked in as well as cotton gloves. Cover the head of small children with a cotton balaclava.

To finish, wash off the skin with soap and water. If you have to wash your hands or genital area during the treatment, cream must be immediately reapplied to these areas.

The Nix® treatment is repeated after one week. Family members or others you have been in contact with, are treated twice also.

Scatol® tablets (ivermectin 3 mg tablets)

Scabies may also be treated with Scatol tablets. The dose is 0.2 mg ivermectin/kg. For a person weighing 60 kg, the dose is 12 mg, i.e., 4 tablets as a single dose, which is the usual dose for adults. Scatol can also be given to children over 5 years/children weighing more than 15 kg. The dose for a child weighing 15 kg is 3 mg, i.e., one Scatol tablet. The tablets are taken as a single dose with food. The treatment is repeated after one week. Oral medication is currently not recommended for women who are pregnant; for breastfeeding women, the medication should only be given if prescribed by a doctor.

Sulfur-Vaseline cream (an extemporaneous preparation)

10% sulfur-Vaseline mix for adults, 5% sulfur-Vaseline mix for elementary school children or younger. Apply the cream on clean, dry skin. Apply the cream carefully to all skin areas from the chin down, including armpits and groin area, elbow creases and behind the knees, between the toes, around the fingernails, the navel, and the genital area. For children under 2 years, apply the cream to the scalp and face as well (not around the eyes).

Apply the cream once a day, three days in a row. Do not wash the skin between the applications. If washing the skin is necessary (hands, genital area), reapply cream to the same areas. After the third day, wash the skin carefully with soap and water, clean the house, and change and wash the bedding. After one week, repeat the treatment in the same way. Sulfur-Vaseline is safe to use during pregnancy and for babies under 2 months old.

Other treatment

After the initial administration of anti-scabies medication, the rash is treated with a cream that contains cortisone, e.g., Hydrocortison® 1%. Apply the cream twice a day for as long as the rash persists. If necessary, tablets (Atarax®) available from the pharmacy by prescription may be used to relieve the itch.

Handling clothing, bedding and towels

Wash the clothes, towels and bedding that were in use at the time of the initial medication use in the washing machine as normal (at least at 50°C). If there are articles (such as shoes) that cannot be washed with water, place them in a plastic bag and put the bag in the freezer for 24 hours, or keep them in a bin bag for at least a week. After treatment, the articles should be given an airing. Vacuum the mattress and bedroom carefully. If the Nix® cream is left on the skin overnight, change the sheets and clean the bedroom in the morning after you have washed off the cream. Use protective gloves to do this. When the treatment is repeated, change your clothes like the first time.

Symptoms after treatment

The itching and skin symptoms caused by scabies infection usually persist for 2–4 weeks. This is caused by an inflammation reaction in the skin and does not mean that the treatment of scabies mites has failed. Do not use Nix® cream more than twice on your own as the cream can cause skin irritation. Both Nix cream and Scatol tablets are generally well tolerated. The treatment may sometimes fail for various reasons. If you are not sure about the outcome, you must see a doctor again.