



# Scabies

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## What is scabies?

Scabies is an itchy skin condition caused by mites, tiny insects that burrow their way under the skin. The mite feeds on human blood and lays eggs under the skin. Both men and women can get scabies.

## How is scabies spread?

Scabies is spread through close person-to-person contact between sex partners or among people who live in the same household. Scabies mites can also be spread through contaminated clothing and bedding.

## What are the symptoms of scabies?

Symptoms may include itching in the infested area, especially at night. This is the result of the body's allergic reaction to the mites, their eggs, and their waste products. The first time a person is ever infested, symptoms usually begin 3 to 4 weeks after exposure. People who have been infested with scabies in the past may develop symptoms much more quickly when re-infested, usually within 24 hours after exposure.

Bumps may appear on the external genitals, between the fingers, and in skin folds such as the inside of the wrist and elbow, the buttocks, and in the creases of the groin. The bumps may become inflamed, crusty, or hard.

## How will I know if I have scabies?

Your doctor or other health-care provider can tell if you have scabies by examining the infested area.

## How is scabies treated?

Medicated creams and lotions can cure scabies. Although the mites themselves will be dead at the end of treatment, itching may continue for a few more weeks because of the body's continuing allergic reaction. If symptoms continue for more than 2 weeks after being treated, you should see your provider again.

Clothes, bedding, towels, and other items that may contain the mites should be machine-washed and dried on a hot cycle setting, or dry-cleaned. Articles that cannot be washed can be sealed in a plastic bag for 72 hours. Fumigation of living areas is not necessary.

A person can become re-infested after treatment if exposed to scabies again.

## What happens if scabies is left untreated?

In addition to the discomfort of the infestation, repeated scratching of the infested area can result in a serious skin infection. If you have symptoms or think you've been exposed to scabies, get examined and treated immediately to avoid any complications. People with a weakened immune system, such as persons with advanced HIV infection, are at higher risk for crusted scabies, a serious skin infection that is more difficult to treat.

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## Scabies, Continued

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### Do sex partners have to be treated?

Yes. If you're diagnosed with scabies, it's important to tell everyone you've had sex with during the past 6-weeks, so they can be examined and treated, too. Take *all* your medication as directed, even if you feel better before the medicine is finished. Don't have sex until you and the people you've had sex with have been completely treated and all of your symptoms have disappeared, or you could infest each other again.

Household members, including children, should also be examined, even if they have no symptoms.

### What if I'm pregnant?

We don't know of any serious effects – on the mother or the baby – of having scabies during pregnancy. Some medicated shampoos and creams used to treat scabies could be dangerous to an unborn baby and should not be used by women who are pregnant or breast-feeding, so you should tell your health-care provider if you're pregnant or breast-feeding when you seek treatment for scabies.

All pregnant women should be tested for other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. You should be tested again during your pregnancy if you are at higher risk for getting an STD. For example, you are at higher risk if you have a new sex partner during pregnancy, or if you have more than one partner. If left untreated, STDs can be devastating for your baby. To protect yourself and your baby against HIV and other STDs, use a latex condom whenever you have sex.

### How can I avoid scabies?

Latex condoms may be helpful in preventing the sexual transmission of scabies, but only when the infested area is covered or protected by the condom.

Infections that are sexually transmitted can be avoided by not having sex. If you are sexually active, you can reduce your risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, by having sex only in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner you are sure is not infected. If you are having sex outside of such a relationship, you can reduce your risk of STDs by:

- 1) *Always using a latex condom (or other type of latex barrier) whenever you have sex – vaginal, anal, or oral.* Condoms made of "natural" materials, such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy, but not against STDs. If you are allergic to latex, you can use condoms made of polyurethane or other synthetic materials.
- 2) *Limiting the number of people you have sex with.*  
The more partners you have, the higher your risk.
- 3) *Avoiding alcohol and drugs when you have sex.* Drinking or getting high makes it much harder to remember to use condoms to protect yourself and others. For free, confidential help with a substance abuse problem, call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638) or just call 311.

### More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department clinics in all 5 boroughs of New York City. Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required. For a list of clinics and hours, visit [nyc.gov/health](http://nyc.gov/health), or call 311.

