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Scabies

What is scabies?

Scabies is a very itchy and contagious skin disease that is caused by a tiny mite (insect). It can affect anyone at any age and is not related to personal cleanliness. The mite that causes scabies is usually too small to be seen by the human eye. It tunnels its way into the skin and sets off a very itchy allergic reaction producing itchy bumps. Human scabies is almost always caught from another person, usually someone whom the affected patient has been in close contact with. It could be a family member or a friend. It may take a month before an infected person will begin itching. The red bumps often occur in the folds and crevices of the body, particularly between the fingers, on the elbows or wrists, buttocks or belt line. Scabies is often incorrectly diagnosed as eczema, dry skin or allergic skin rashes.

How do I get rid of scabies?

Scabies can easily be treated with a prescription drug containing 5 % permethrin cream. This cream is applied to the skin from head-to-toe at bedtime and washed off the next morning. The cream should be applied over the entire body (including the palms of the hands, and soles of the feet, and the scalp in small children) and left on for 8 to 14 hours. A second treatment one week later may be recommended for infants with scabies of the palms and soles, or if new lesions appear after treatment. All lesions should be healed within four weeks after the treatment. If a patient continues to have trouble he or she may be getting reinfected and requires further treatment by a dermatologist. Permethrin cream can cause a mild, temporary burning and stinging, particularly in bad cases of scabies.

Another effective prescription treatment is lindane 1 % lotion. Patients using lindane are instructed to apply it to the skin and wash it off after 8 to 12 hours. You should not to exceed recommended doses and should avoid a second treatment within a 7-day period. This medicine has been reported to rarely cause toxic effects on the nervous system. Lindane should not be used on infants, small children, pregnant or nursing women, or people with seizures or other neurological diseases.

Sulfur ointment and Crotamiton 10 % cream are other special care treatment options. Recent studies have indicated that ivermectin is also effective at a dose of 200 microg/kg body weight with a repeated dose in 1 to 2 weeks.

Ant-itch pills (e.g., Benadryl) and (or) anti-itch lotions (e.g. Sarna) are helpful in alleviating the itching that can last up to two weeks after treatment with the anti-scabies medications.

It is very important that all members in a household with an affected member are treated at the same time, as well as others who are in close contact with the affected person, such as close friends, and sometimes day care or school classmates. The reason for this is that some people may have scabies without signs or symptoms, and can reinfest others after they are treated. Recently worn clothing, bed linens and towels should be washed in hot water, and machine dried as part of the treatment process to prevent reinfection.

