



Scabies

Information for the public | Reviewed and updated 2026

Scabies is treatable. Treat early and treat close contacts at the same time.

What is scabies?

Scabies is an itchy skin infestation caused by tiny mites that burrow into the upper layer of the skin. Anyone can get scabies; it is not caused by poor hygiene.

The mites are usually too small to see. They lay eggs in the skin and cause an immune reaction, which leads to itching and a rash.

Symptoms

- intense itching, especially at night
- a raised rash, spots, blisters or small burrow lines in the skin
- rash often between the fingers, around wrists, under arms, waist, groin and bottom
- in babies, young children, older people and people with weakened immunity, the head, neck, palms and soles may also be affected

How scabies spreads

Scabies usually spreads through direct, prolonged skin-to-skin contact. It can also spread through sexual contact.

It is less commonly spread through recently used clothes, towels or bedding. A quick handshake or brief hug is unlikely to spread scabies.

Treatment

Ask a pharmacist, GP or healthcare professional for advice. Treatment is usually a cream or lotion applied to the whole body. Follow the product instructions carefully.

- Everyone in the household should be treated at the same time, even if they do not have symptoms.
- Sexual contacts from the previous 8 weeks should also be treated.
- Treatment usually needs to be repeated 7 days later.
- Do not use pharmacy treatments on children under 2 years old - they should be seen by a GP.

Using treatment correctly

- Apply treatment to cool, dry skin. Do not apply it straight after a hot bath or shower.
- Cover the whole body, not just the rash. Include between fingers and toes, under nails, behind ears, soles of feet, genitals, scalp and face as directed. Avoid eyes, nose and mouth.
- Leave the treatment on for the recommended time, usually 8 to 12 hours, then wash it off.
- If you wash your hands during the treatment period, reapply the treatment to your hands.

Laundry and home advice

- On the first day of treatment, wash bedding, clothing and towels at 60°C or higher where possible, and dry using a hot cycle if available.
- Put items that cannot be washed in a sealed bag for at least 3 days until the mites die.
- Put on clean clothes and change bedding after applying treatment.
- Vacuum floors, carpets and soft furnishings as part of routine cleaning.

Do not

- Do not have sex or close physical contact until the full course of treatment is complete.
- Do not share bedding, clothing or towels with someone who has scabies.
- Do not scratch the rash if you can avoid it, as broken skin may become infected.

Going back to work, school or nursery

Adults and children aged 5 years and over can usually return to work or school once treatment has started, but should avoid close contact with others for the first 24 hours.

Children under 5 can usually return to nursery or pre-school 24 hours after the first treatment.

When to contact a GP

- a child under 2 has symptoms, or someone in the household has scabies
- you may have a skin infection, eczema or another skin condition
- you have a crusted, flaky rash, especially on elbows, knees, hands or feet
- itching continues 2 to 4 weeks after treatment has finished, or new burrows/rashes appear

After treatment

Itching can continue for a few weeks after treatment, even when the mites have been killed. This does not always mean treatment has failed. Ask a GP or pharmacist for advice if symptoms continue or worsen.

Pets do not spread human scabies. They can have a different mite called mange, which does not reproduce on humans.