

Patient education: Scabies (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is scabies? — Scabies is a condition that makes your skin very itchy. It happens when tiny insects called mites burrow under your skin to lay their eggs.

How did I get scabies? — You probably caught scabies from someone else who has it. The condition spreads easily between people who are in close contact. It is also possible to catch scabies from the clothes of someone with the condition.

Are there symptoms besides itching? — Yes. The main symptom is itching, but there are other symptoms. People with scabies usually get little red bumps or blisters on their skin ([picture 1](#)). Sometimes the bumps are hard to see. Some people even notice tiny tunnels in their skin where the mites have buried themselves.

These are the body parts that are most often affected by scabies ([figure 1](#)):

- The fingers and webbing between the fingers
- The skin folds around the wrists, elbows, and knees
- The armpits
- The area around the nipples (especially in women)
- The waist
- The penis and scrotum (in men)
- The lower buttocks and upper thighs
- The sides and bottoms of the feet

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Yes, see your doctor or nurse. If you have scabies, he or she can give you medicine to get rid of it. You can get infections if you keep scratching at it.

How is scabies treated? — Your doctor or nurse can give you a prescription for a medicine that kills the mites that cause scabies. A medicine that is often used is called [permethrin](#) (brand names: Elimite, Acticin).

[Permethrin](#) comes in a cream or lotion that you put on your skin. You must use the medicine exactly how the doctor or nurse tells you to. Otherwise it might not work.

A medicine that comes in a pill called [ivermectin](#) can also cure scabies. You need a prescription for this medicine.

If you are being treated for scabies, the doctor or nurse will probably want the people who live with you to be treated, too. They might be carrying the mite that causes scabies, even if they have no symptoms.

When you start treatment, wash all the clothes you and others in your home wore in the last 4 to 5 days in hot water. Then dry them in a dryer on high heat. You should also wash any bedclothes (sheets and blankets) or towels people in your home have touched. If your child is getting treated, wash his or her stuffed animals, too. Dry-cleaning will also get rid of the scabies mite. Any bedding, clothing, or towels that you cannot wash or dry-clean should be placed in a sealed plastic bag for at least 3 days. Scabies mites usually die without contact with human skin after a few days.

What can I do to stop the itching? — You can take medicines called antihistamines. These are the medicines people often take for allergies.

Itching can last for several weeks, even after the scabies mite is gone. Your doctor or nurse might suggest you use a cream with a medicine called a steroid to help with the itching. (These are not the same steroids that athletes take to build up muscle.) These steroids relieve itching and swelling.

When can my child go back to school? — Your child can go back to school after one day of treatment.

Some people get a severe kind of scabies — People with HIV or AIDS, cancer, or other conditions can get a severe type of scabies called "crusted scabies." Crusted scabies causes large, crusty red patches or bumps to form on the skin. It spreads more easily than regular scabies. People with crusted scabies often get it on their head, hands, and feet. They sometimes need to take pills to get rid of scabies.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Scabies \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Jan 12, 2017.

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Topic 15464 Version 4.0

GRAPHICS

Scabies between the fingers

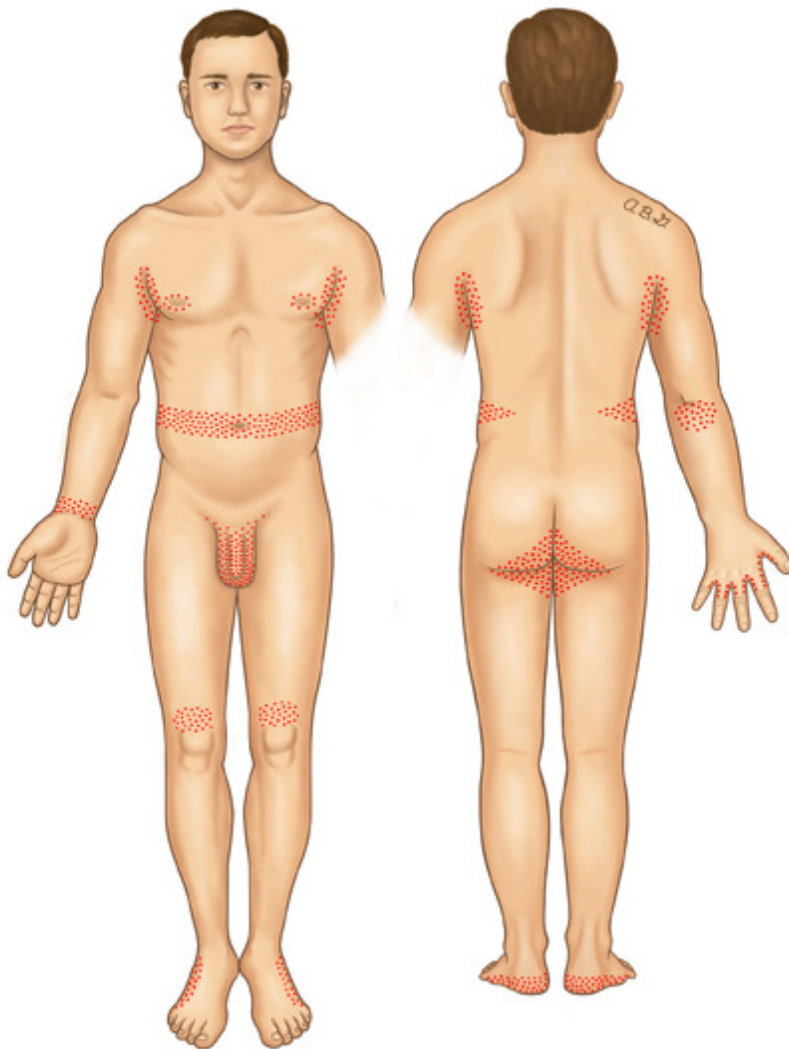


Scabies often affects the webs of the fingers.

Courtesy of John T Crissey, MD.

Graphic 54705 Version 2.0

Parts of the body affected by scabies



Scabies usually affects the sides and webs of the fingers, inside of the wrists, elbows, armpits, skin around the nipples (especially in women), skin around the belly button, waist, male genitals (scrotum and penis), knees, lower half of the butt and tops of thighs, and sides and backs of the feet. The back is not usually affected. The head is not usually affected except in very young children.

Graphic 79896 Version 4.0