

Tays / Dermatology

Scabies

Scabies is caused by scabies mites. The mites are very small, 0.3 to 0.4mm in size, and live in tunnels they burrow into the skin. Scabies mites are parasites that exclusively feed on humans. Because the skin becomes sensitive to the mites and their secretions, they cause itching and rashes. Scabies remains common.

Symptoms

The most common symptom of scabies is itching, which is especially noticeable in the evenings and at night. There may be small or larger spots and scratches on the skin. Small vesicles and pustules are quite common. The most affected areas are usually the hands and wrists, the armpits and the abdominal area, the buttocks, and the feet. Red papules may appear on the breasts in women and on the genital area in men. Thin, pale, mite tunnels a few millimetres in length most often occur on wrists and between the fingers. Crusted scabies may develop all over the skin in the elderly and in immunocompromised individuals. In young children and the elderly, scabies may also spread to the scalp.

Spread

The mite is transmitted through skin contact from one person to another. Infection requires prolonged skin-to-skin contact (e.g. sexual contact, wrestling, holding hands, or sleeping in the same bed). Brief contact, such as shaking hands or hugging, does not usually lead to infection. Scabies is more likely to spread in families and groups, such as children in day care or elderly people in care homes. Epidemics sometimes occur in medical institutions, where both staff and relatives might be infected. Scabies may also be transmitted through surfaces and textiles (e.g. clothing, bed sheets, furniture), but this is less common than direct contact infection.

Incubation period

After infection with scabies, there is an asymptomatic period of two to six weeks. During this period, it is already possible for mites be transmitted from one person to another. In the case of reinfection, symptoms start quickly, within a few days.

Diagnosis

A definite diagnosis requires the detection of scabies tunnels. A doctor or a nurse can use a dermatoscope to locate the mite at the end of the tunnel or extract it with a needle for microscopy.

Treatment

Treatment involves effective medication, changing clothes and bed sheets, and scabies cleaning. The patient, all family members and any persons in close contact who may have been infected (e.g. a partner living at a different address) are treated simultaneously. Treatment with Nix cream and Scatol tablets needs to be repeated after 7-14 days to ensure the efficacy of the treatment.

Scabies medication

Scabies medication available in Finland include over-the-counter permethrin cream (Nix®), prescription ivermectin tablets (Scatol®) and prescription 10% sulphur ointment (ex tempore prescription).

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Nix® cream (permethrin; 30 g tube)

One 30 g tube is usually enough for a single treatment of one adult. The cream is applied preferably in the evening to clean and dry skin from the toes to the tip of the chin, neck, and ears. The cream is also applied to the scalp and face (not around the eyes), if there are any symptoms of scabies in these areas, and always for children under two years of age and elderly people. Particular care should be taken when applying to the hands, wrists, between the toes and fingers, under the fingernails, to the navel, armpits, buttocks, groin, and external genitalia. The duration of action is 8-12 hours for adults and children over two years of age, and 6-8 hours for babies. The average amount of cream required for one treatment is provided in the instructions on the packaging. At the end of the treatment, the skin is washed with water and soap. If washing of the hands and genitals is necessary during the duration of the treatment, more cream should be applied immediately again to these areas. Nix® treatment should always be repeated after one week, including for all family members and close contacts.

Scatol® tablets (ivermectin; 3 mg tablet)

The dosage of ivermectin is 0.2 mg/kg. Therefore, for a patient who weighs 60kg, a normal dose is 12 mg (four tablets) taken at once. The medication is always repeated after 7-14 days. Ivermectin should be taken with a (fatty) meal. Consumption of orange juice or alcohol during the treatment should be avoided. Ivermectin interacts with some medicines. Family members and persons in close contact are also treated twice at a 7-14 days interval.

Sulphur ointment 10%

Apply sulphur ointment to clean, dry skin on three consecutive nights. Apply from the tips of your toes to the tip of your chin, your neck, and around your ears. The ointment is also applied to the scalp and face (not around the eyes), if there are any symptoms of scabies in these areas, and always for children under two years of age and elderly people. Particular care should be taken when applying to the hands, wrists, between the toes and fingers, under the fingernails, to the navel, armpits, buttocks, groin, and external genitalia. The ointment should be left on the skin for 8 to 24 hours (preferably 24 hours), after which it should be washed off and the skin dried thoroughly before reapplication. The ointment is suitable for use during pregnancy and on babies under 2 months of age. Sulphur ointment has a strong odour that may transfer to any clothing worn during treatment. Family members and close contacts should also be treated in the same manner for three consecutive nights.

Cleaning and handling clothes during treatment

During treatment, clothes, towels, and bed sheets should be washed using a normal machine wash (60°C). Outdoor clothing (including coats, gloves, footwear, and hats) and children's plush toys, etc., should also be washed. If a garment cannot be machine washed, place it in a plastic bag in the freezer (-20°) for 24 hours or seal it in a plastic bag at room temperature for 7 days. Mattresses, sofas, upholstered chairs, carpets, and floors should be vacuumed.

This cleaning should be carried out after the treatment period (with Nix cream and Scatol tablets 8-15 hours after administering the treatment, e.g. the next morning). In the case of treatment with sulphur ointment, the cleaning is carried out the morning after the third treatment. Use rubber gloves for cleaning and washing textiles.

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Symptoms after medication

The itching and skin symptoms caused by scabies infection often last for 2–3 weeks. They are caused by the infection of the skin and do not mean that the scabies medication has failed. Do not use Nix® cream more than twice without a doctor's supervision, as the cream may also irritate the skin. Both the Nix cream and the Scatol tablets are generally well tolerated. Sulphur ointment can cause slight irritation and dryness of the skin. The treatment may sometimes fail for various reasons. If you suspect the infection has not cleared, you need to see a doctor again.