

GOLDMAN DERMATOLOGY, PLLC

212-962-1115

www.goldmandermatology.com

SCABIES - WHAT TO DO

If you have been diagnosed with scabies, your first thought is "How do I get rid of this thing?" We are going to give the instructions first, and give the background story later.

Typical scabies treatment is with a prescription called Permethrin cream. Your doctor may write Elimite, which is the trademark name for this product which should now be generic. The medication is applied as a cream all over the **entire** body where you can reach (not just the spots), from the jaw line and the back of the neck all the way down to your toes. The scabies is a tiny mite that can burrow under the skin. It particularly likes body folds, so pay special attention to using this cream in your armpits and in your groin folds, particularly between your fingers (finger webs) and between your toes (toe webs). Also apply it to your belly button and to the genital skin. Special attention should be placed to underneath the fingernails, which should be clipped short. You must also place it underneath any rings or watch bands. Don't worry if you cannot reach your entire back, as scratching often distributes the mites in a broader area, and they cannot go where they cannot be transferred by your own hands. You do not need to treat the face or scalp. Your doctor may recommend a second treatment one week later. (Note, not every day for a week)

There are also instructions for what to do around the house. The scabies mite can only live off the human body for a day or two. This affects treatment. You do not need to fumigate your entire apartment. However, you do need to wash your bed and pillow sheets in hot water. This should be done the morning after applying the medication at night. You should not shower until you have put the sheets in the wash. You do not need to wash the blankets. Clothing needs to be addressed. You should wash clothing from the previous two days also in hot water. Again, put them in the wash before you have taken a shower. This makes sense since you will still have the pesticide on you and will not reinfect yourself, which is one of the most common problems with scabies treatment. If you do not have access to laundry for any reason, you could put two days worth of previous clothes and bed sheets into a garbage bag for a week and the mites will perish. You can dry clean items that can't be washed at home. Non-washable items can be isolated for two weeks in sealed plastic bags. Please vacuum the entire house and throw away the vacuum cleaner bag to prevent any mites from escaping into the house.

Scabies is spread by human to human transmission. While there are variants of scabies that affect animals, they cannot reproduce on humans and vice versa. People who have direct contact with a person carrying scabies are at high risk for infection, particularly if they share a bed. We have also seen family members where all members were infected and mistreated with massive doses of steroids, so that contact does not need to be sexual. We have also seen many visitors to nursing homes, and even health care personnel develop scabies. We do recommend sexual partners and close personal contacts be examined and treated. At your doctor's discretion, an extra tube may be given for a close contact. It is very important that all contacts be treated at the same time to prevent re-infestation.

As an alternative in persistent cases or in those people with a decreased immune system or limited mobility, your doctor may recommend oral treatment with Ivermectin. However, it is not

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FDA approved for scabies, and safety in pregnant women has not been established. Treatment usually consists of a set of pills and then repeating the medication in a week. Repeating the medication in a week is not mandatory. However, your doctor may recommend it depending on the severity of the infection.

There are a host of natural remedies for scabies such as tea tree oil and bush tea, although there are not a lot of proven studies. There are also alternatives such as a Lindane, which has been commonly used due to side effects. There is another one called Crotamiton which is not as effective as others but which does help with itching.

It is important to note that whichever treatment you take, the itching can persist for several weeks and even up to a month after applying an effective scabies treatment, as the mites are still on your body and the skin takes 28 days to turn over. Some time will pass before all the mite particles are shed. Your itching may persist during this time, but it should abate.

The diagnosis of scabies is very difficult. You may read brochures that doctors can find this easily by doing scrapings. The scrapings can be quite painful and bloody and it usually takes at least ten scrapings to find any evidence of a mite, mite eggs or mite feces on microscopic exam. If the patient is going to be treated anyway, the importance of a biopsy diagnosis or a scraping diagnosis is less important. This is especially true in very healthy and clean people where fewer than 10 to 15 mites may be present. Since scabies is typically diagnosed by a doctor clinically, i.e. by looking at the patient, some caveats must remain in place. Scabies in our experience typically causes itching out of proportion to the physical findings. For instance, unlike an allergic reaction to, say, something like poison ivy where there is widespread scaling rash and even blisters, scabies causes minimal pinpoint bumps or scabs on the body. There are, of course, many causes of generalized itching (pruritus). Rarely there are internal causes of itching such as kidney and liver problems, or even cancer, particularly lymphomas. As such, your doctor may order some blood tests and a chest x-ray in an attempt to find other causes. You should always return to your doctor in a month if the itching persists.

Lastly, it is important to note that most people who initially get infested with scabies have no symptoms during the first 2 to 6 weeks (incubation period). However, they can still be spreading it during this time. A critical threshold in the number of mites as well as sensitization to the mites needs to occur in patients before they develop the symptoms we call itching, and they start to scratch their skin.