

SCABIES

I was asked recently by a customer in Whelehans to write an article on Scabies for the Westmeath Topic. Scabies is a contagious skin condition caused by infestation with a microscopic mite.

The scabies mite burrows into the skin, and is most commonly found around the hands, feet and male genitalia. It does not usually affect the neck and head, although it may in infants, the elderly and those whose immune system is not functioning properly. Scabies can affect people of any age but is most common in children and young adults. It is highly contagious and is spread by close physical contact, especially in overcrowded living conditions. It can also be passed on by sexual contact.

The elderly and people who do not have a fully functioning immune system are more likely to have crusted scabies (also called Norwegian scabies). This is a highly contagious condition in which the skin thickens, forming a crust, and rather than having the usual amount of female mites (around 12), a person with crusted scabies can have an infestation of thousands. Crusted scabies is transmitted by physical contact and can also be transmitted via bedding, towels, clothes and upholstery.

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of scabies begin to appear about 2-6 weeks after infestation. However, if a person is re-infested after a previous experience of scabies, then the symptoms can appear in a few hours because the body is already sensitised to the mites.

The mite's burrows can be seen as thin, light brown or silvery, wavy lines. They usually appear on the wrists, elbows, or genitals, or between the fingers. Burrows can be between 2mm and 15mm long, and it is sometimes possible to see a dark speck at one end (the mite). Burrows can be hard to find because they are easily destroyed or distorted by scratching. Widespread itching will be experienced, particularly at night, as the infested person develops an allergic reaction to the mites, their eggs and their faeces. A rash of raised, pinkish-red spots will appear, most commonly on the inner thigh, underarms, buttocks and genitals, and around the belly button.

Excessive scratching can cause a bacterial infection such as impetigo, which may make symptoms worse. In infants and children, other parts of the body are sometimes affected, including the face, scalp, palms and soles of the feet.

CAUSES

Scabies is caused by a mite that burrows under the skin. The skin produces an allergic reaction and intense itching develops. Scabies is highly contagious and is spread by close physical contact. Household pets also have mites but these are not the same type of mite that infest humans. However people can have a temporary allergic reaction to mites on pets.

TREATMENT

Treatment is applied to the whole body, including the scalp, face, neck and ears. Special attention should be paid to skin between the toes and between the fingers, and under the nails. To prevent re-infestation, all people in close contact should be treated at the same time (eg) the whole household.

Permethrin cream (Lyclear[®] cream) is the primary treatment option. It tends not to irritate the skin and should be left on for 8 to 12 hours, or overnight, before being washed off. Recently updated advice on permethrin cream recommends that the cream is applied twice, one week apart for scabies. One 30g tube should be sufficient for one application; however larger people may require two tubes. Malathion lotion (Derbac M[®]) was a good option as it was easy to apply (as it was a lotion). However Derbac M[®] has recently gone off the market in Ireland. It is not advisable to apply any treatment straight after a hot bath or shower, because the lotion will be absorbed deeper into the body. Do not wash hands for 12 hours after treatment as it will wash the treatment off.

To prevent you becoming re-infested and to prevent you transmitting the mite to others; all clothing, towels, and bed linen should be machine-washed (at 50 C or above) after the first treatment is applied. Items that cannot be washed, for example, upholstery, can be kept in plastic bags or covered in plastic for at least 72 hours to contain the mites until they die. Mites will not last longer than 72 hours outside the human body.

If applied correctly, the prescribed lotion or cream will kill the mites, but their bodies are still in the skin, which means that itching may continue for up to three weeks after successful treatment. Calamine lotion or Eurax[®] lotion and cool showers or baths may relieve the itch. Antihistamines which are available over the counter in pharmacies can give relief from the itching. You can purchase non-drowsy antihistamines in pharmacy for adults and children which give 24 hour relief. Whelehans also stock less expensive and equally effective generic versions of these antihistamines.

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591. You can find us on Facebook.