

Scabies within the balfolk community

If you have any questions about this document or scabies after reading this, or are unsure about what to do, please contact Anouck van der Leij (anouck@balfolk.nl) or your local doctor.

What's scabies?

Scabies (Nederlands "schurft", français "gale, scabiose", Deutsch "Krätze, Skabies", italiano "scabbia", polski "Świerzb", português "sarna") is a contagious skin infestation caused by a very small bug, the *Sarcoptes scabiei* or itch mite. This mite is smaller than 0.5 mm and it's hardly visible with the naked eye. The mite digs tiny burrows or corridors in the top layers of the human skin and lays its eggs there. Scabies does not disappear on its own. Therefore, targeted treatment is important, also to prevent the mite from spreading and from infecting other people around you.

One of the most important symptoms is increasing levels of itches. This is caused by an allergic reaction to the mites, eggs and excrement. The itch can be present across most of the body and is at its peak in high temperatures and during the night. The skin may show small blisters, rash, scaling and little red bumps. Sometimes, also the small burrows that the mite digs are visible as thin lines (max. 1.5 cm in length, grey/white, red, or skin-coloured). The burrows and skin conditions can appear across the body, but especially on and between fingers, wrists, elbows, feet, armpits, buttocks, around the genitalia, around the navel/belly button, and for women also around the nipples. The symptoms can vary greatly between people and are sometimes not easily identifiable as scabies. For young kids and people with a strongly weakened immune system, the symptoms may also appear on the face and scalp.

Cause and infection

Scabies can be transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, by sharing a bed, couch, clothes, or towels. The Dutch national institute for health says that about 15 minutes of contact is needed for transmission. This is a fairly arbitrary limit, however, and experience shows that it can be quicker than that. In the right environment (high humidity, temperature above 20 °C), the mite becomes more active and more likely to infect others. We therefore suspect that a long and/or close mazurka could in some cases already lead to infection. After all, the mites walk from one body to the next. If they are on your fingers while dancing with someone, the distance the mite has to cross to walk over to your dance partner's fingers is way below average.

You are contagious from the moment you are infected yourself. Of course, the risk of contagion depends on the number of mites on your body. Itch mites can't jump and move very slowly, but if you're touching someone with a part of your body that coincidentally holds a few mites, the mite will cross over and infect the other nonetheless. Knowing that fingers and wrists are particularly favourite spots for the mite, we can't rule out infection through dancing.

The first time someone is infected, it takes 2 - 6 weeks for the symptoms to appear. For any consecutive infection, the symptoms start to show within a few days, because the allergic reaction that is triggered by the mite is already 'known' to the body's immune system. For people with a delayed or weakened immune system, the symptoms can take more than 6 weeks to appear.

Diagnosis

It is possible for a local GP/doctor to send some skin scrapes to a lab to diagnose scabies. However, doctors often choose not to do so. In a typical infection, there are only 1 to 35 adult mites present on the body. The chances of finding one are very slim. So, when checking the skin scrapes in the lab and not finding any mites, it doesn't mean that you don't have scabies. Adding to that, the results of that research would take approximately a week to arrive and in that time, you could be infecting others. That's why doctors usually choose to start the treatment when they suspect scabies. It is wise to discuss with your doctor the risk of infection for you and for others around you, but don't expect the doctor to conclusively tell you whether you have scabies or not.

Treatment

Scabies is treatable. Housemates, sexual partners, or others you regularly have skin-to-skin contact with may also be infected, even if they don't show symptoms (yet). It's important to treat scabies together, simultaneously and thoroughly, to prevent reinfection.

Scabies is treated in one of two ways. The first and most common one is an ointment/salve (lozazol, permethrine) that is applied across the whole body before going to bed. It takes 8 to 12 hours to be fully effective. In the Netherlands, the ointment is available over the counter at pharmacies for about € 20,-. Your local doctor can also prescribe it for you. Twelve hours after you applied the ointment (as per the instructions that come with it), you are no longer contagious. There could be some eggs left that hatch over the following days, so it's often recommended to repeat the treatment. Talk to your doctor about this.

In some cases, a doctor will prescribe ivermectine tablets. These are generally quite aggressive to your body, so are only prescribed when the other option doesn't suffice.

All textiles that you have touched in the 3 days before the treatment (clothes, bed linen, couch, plushies, (tea) towels, etcetera) have to be washed at a temperature of at least 60 °C, or to be put in a closed plastic bag for at least 3 days to prevent new skin flakes reaching the mites inside. The mites will die after three days. Unfortunately, going to the sauna doesn't work for your skin because the human skin is exceptionally good at keeping us cool.

The ointment really has to cover your whole body (except above the jawline). It also needs to stay there between 8 to 12 hours and you have to make sure you don't wipe it off while you sleep. The ointment has to form a complete film across your body so that you reach all mites with it. Before applying the ointment, cut your nails so that the ointment reaches under them as well. Ask someone else to apply the ointment to your back if you can't properly reach it. Don't forget the soles of your feet. Leave a little bit of ointment so you can reapply it to your hands when you wash them, for example. To prevent wiping off

the ointment during the night, you could very carefully put on socks and slim-fitting clothes that do not move during your sleep. There are no official statements on clothing during the treatment, so we'll leave this up to you. The morning after you applied the ointment, shower and clean yourself properly, use a clean towel. Put on clean and non-infected clothing. This takes longer than a normal shower, so plan some time for it.

After successful treatment, the allergic reaction and itch can continue to last up until 4 weeks. It's important to see if new spots appear. If that happens, talk to your local doctor again. If the itch continues, try using a greasy skin cream. The treatment is known to damage your skin temporarily, and your skin will probably need time to recover from it.

What other things to take into account?

- Notify all people that you have shared more than 5-10 minutes of physical contact with. Include housemates, sexual partners, people that have used your couch or bed, people of which you have used a couch or bed, people you have visited, or that you have lend clothes to or from. Also, of course, people you have closely danced with. If you know when you got infected, notify the people that you have since then shared the above with. If you don't know when you got infected, inform as many people as you can. Don't trust your memory, but also use your agenda to check if you didn't forget anyone. The people that have never been infected before demand special treatment, because their symptoms may only show after 6 weeks, time in which they can infect a lot of others.
- Your bedlinen has to be cleaned before starting the treatment, and again the morning after. Turn your mattress over before starting the treatment and preferably put your blanket and mattress outside to air, both before and after the treatment.
- All clothes that you have worn or touched in the three days leading up to the treatment need to be washed. The same goes for bed linen and towels used in the three days before and the day after the treatment. Use disposable gloves to do so.
- Washable textile needs to be washed at a temperature of at least 50 °C. Textile that can't be washed needs to be put in plastic bags at room temperature or below.
- To prevent having to put your whole wardrobe into bags you could also prepare and put a few sets of clothing into plastic bags. Make sure you do this at least three days before you do the treatment. These clothes will then be clean and non-infected when you finish the treatment. After the treatment, you can then keep your whole wardrobe closed for three days (or cover an open wardrobe in plastic) and dress in the prepared sets of clothing.
- Scabies also spreads through couches. Don't use your couch for three days, or cover it in plastic. Make sure that no-one uses the couch, not even housemates or guests.
- There could be some eggs left that hatch over the following days, so it's considered a good idea to repeat the treatment. If you do not exhibit any symptoms, one treatment suffices. If you're sure you are infected or are exhibiting symptoms, repeat the treatment after 7 to 14 days (talk to your local doctor about it).
- In young kids, scabies can also infect the scalp. The treatment for them is a smaller dose of the same ointment. For people in bad health or having a failing or weakened immune system, the symptoms of scabies can be more serious.

- Both humans and animals can get scabies. However, human scabies is different than the scabies of your pets. Cross-infection is possible, but the mites won't survive for long. Contact your doctor if you are worried about having infected your pets.