SCABIES

What is it?

Scabies is the allergic reaction to having a skin infection with a mite. It can be uncomfortable but it is not a serious disease.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is itching which is often worst after a hot bath and in bed at night. There can also be a rash on the wrists, fingers, feet and on the trunk, especially around the waist. This rash is caused by the body reacting to the waste products of the mites in the skin which get into the blood stream. The mites may be present in other places on the body, especially the hands. The rash may take several weeks to develop after infection with the mite.

Is it infectious?

Yes. The mite is transmitted by skin to skin contact in a warm environment, eg in bed or by children holding hands or nurses giving care to infected patients; it can take several minutes of contact for this to happen. The scabies mite does not survive for long outside the human body, so you cannot pick it up from bedclothes.

What is the incubation period?

Scabies symptoms (itching and rash) may start about 3 to 6 weeks after contact with an infected person.

Is there any treatment?

Yes. You can get scabies lotions from your chemist. These lotions need to be painted on the body as instructed on the container. The head should be treated if the person is immunouncompromised, less than two years of age, is elderly with thinning hair, or when previous treatment has failed. Some lotions need to be applied twice. If you are not sure of the diagnosis, see a doctor.

Are there any problems with the treatment?

The treatment should not be applied after a hot bath. The treatments are safe but anyone who has eczema, epilepsy, or who is pregnant should consult their own doctor. Remember that itching can continue for up to two weeks after the treatment has been applied. This itching after treatment can be soothed by calamine lotion and soothing creams.

Who should be treated?

The whole family should be treated even if only one person in the family has obvious scabies (others may not yet have developed the itching and rash).

How long should you stay off school or work?

You can go back the day after you have been treated.