

## **SCABIES**

### **WHAT IS SCABIES?**

Scabies is a communicable disease of the skin that is caused by a tiny bug called a mite (*Sarcoptes scabiei*). The mites dig into the skin and lay their eggs. The mites can burrow beneath the skin surface in 2 ½ minutes. Symptoms include intense itching, especially at night. Sores can become infected from scratching. Common places where the mites burrow include the finger webs, the folds of the elbows and wrist, and the belt line. Men are often affected in the genital area and women are often affected at the nipples, abdomen and lower buttocks.

### **HOW IS SCABIES SPREAD?**

Scabies is transmitted when a person's skin comes into contact with the skin of an infected person. Scabies can also be spread by contact with contaminated undergarments and bedclothes. It takes two to six weeks (*incubation period*) to become infected for persons that have not previously been infected. It only takes one to four days to become infected for those who have had the infection before.

### **WHO IS AT RISK?**

Anyone who comes into contact with an infected person can get scabies. Health care workers can get scabies by contact with infected patients. Day care workers, classroom aides, and others who work with children can be exposed at the workplace.

### **HOW CAN WORKERS BE PROTECTED FROM SCABIES?**

In addition to avoiding discomfort, it is important to prevent scabies because some of the products used to treat scabies contain toxic chemicals. Therefore, the following precautions should be taken to prevent the spread of the disease.

- **Isolation and notification:** Hospitalized patients must be isolated from other patients or residents until 24 hours after the start of effective treatment. Contact isolation cards with easy to understand instructions need to be posted in the area near the infected patient(s). Visitors who have had skin-to-skin contact with the infested person should be notified about the infection and treatment measures. School employees, day care workers and social service workers should immediately contact a parent, guardian of a child or the client if a case of scabies is suspected so that the individual can be seen by a physician and treatment can be started.

- **Avoiding contact (work practices):** Workers need to avoid skin-to-skin contact with infected individuals.
- **Protective clothing:** Contact precautions, including gloves, must be taken when contact is necessary.
- **Handwashing:** Workers must wash hands immediately after touching patients, clients, children, other infested persons, and potentially contaminated bedding or garments.
- **Laundry:** Underwear, clothing, and bed sheets worn or used in the 48 hours prior to treatment need to be discarded or laundered using hot cycles of the washer and dryer. Contaminated articles should be bagged and labeled. Plastic bags that dissolve in water should be used for all contaminated materials and loaded directly into washing machines.
- **Training:** Workers should be educated about scabies, how it is spread and how to control infections. Complaints of itching and/or even a minimal rash should be reported to a supervisor so that a physician can examine the patient to make the diagnosis.

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For more information about protecting workers from workplace hazards, please contact the AFSCME Research & Collective Bargaining Department, Health and Safety Program at (202) 429-1215. You can also contact our office located at 1625 L Street, NW Washington, DC 20036.