

ADVICE SHEET ON SCABIES

Advice for Employees & Their Managers

Scabies is a surprisingly common intensely itchy skin infection. Due to its' association in the mind of the general public with poor hygiene and poverty, it is one of those conditions, similar to lice and other such infections, which we find difficult talking about to neighbours, friends or colleagues. Scabies is a very common problem, particularly in schools and other institutions, where people live closely together or spend a significant amount of time together.

It is very difficult to be specific about the exact nature of a scabies rash as doctors find it very difficult to diagnose. The rash takes many forms, sometimes red lines or burrows are seen between the fingers or on other parts of the skin. Commonly, itching from the scabies rash is worse at night when the organisms causing scabies, a small mite that burrows into the skin, is most active. The scabies mite burrows just under the skin, often between the fingers, on the wrists or elbows and in the genital area, and it is the body's reaction to the presence of the mite, usually an extremely itchy red rash, that causes the symptoms. An additional infection can occur from excessive scratching when we introduce further germs from our hands into the already inflamed skin. This again provides difficulties for the doctors who are diagnosing the rash.

Scabies infection spreads from person to person usually by close skin contact, for example cuddling, but can be caught by shaking hands. The infection can also spread by sharing clothing, bed linen or sitting in infected upholstered seating. It is also accepted that on occasions the scabies mite can jump when a non-infected person stands too close to an infected person!

Once an individual has been infected by the scabies mite, it takes approximately three weeks from the time of infection before the skin rash, which is a reaction to the infection, and the itching begin. Once the diagnosis has been made treatment is required. The medicines available to treat scabies are available from any local chemist and take the form of a liquid or a cream. The medicines do not require a prescription, however, advice should be sought from your doctor when treating children under two years and babies.

It is extremely important to follow the instructions that come with the medication and not cut corners, either in applying the medication or with regards to the timing between doses of medication. When there is an outbreak of scabies in a family, it is important to treat the whole family at the same time, including those members who do not have symptoms because they may be infected but develop the symptoms later. Other medication in the form of tablets, syrup or cream is available from the pharmacist, or from the General Practitioner, to treat the itching symptoms.

Scabies is very difficult to prevent. Good personal hygiene, regular washing of clothes, bed linen and regular cleaning of furniture upholstery will help. The most important issue is to be

open and honest, both within the workplace, the family and the wider community, when scabies has affected individuals, so that the appropriate treatment and precautions can be made available to everyone who is potentially at risk.

