

FACTS ABOUT FIFTH DISEASE

What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is a mild illness caused by parvovirus B19. It is also known as “slapped cheek disease” or erythema infectiosum. It occurs most commonly in children.

What are the symptoms of fifth disease?

Fifth disease may begin with a mild fever, malaise, or cold-like symptoms. A few days later a bright red rash appears on the cheeks that make them appear to have been "slapped." The rash spreads and red blotches (usually lighter in color) extend down to the trunk, arms, and legs. As the centers of the blotches begin to clear, the rash takes on a lacy net-like appearance. The rash may be accompanied by itching. It usually resolves in 7 to 10 days, but may recur for 1 to 3 weeks upon exposure to heat or sunlight. Adults who get fifth disease may develop the typical rash seen in children, joint pain and swelling, or may have no symptoms at all. Symptoms usually appear 4 to 20 days after exposure.

How is fifth disease spread?

Fifth disease is spread from person-to-person during the early part of the illness by having contact with respiratory secretions such as saliva or mucus from an infected person. Objects such as used tissues, mouthed toys, drinking cups, and utensils can spread the virus. Once the characteristic "slapped cheek" rash appears, a person is no longer contagious. The virus only infects humans. Animal parvoviruses are different, so cats and dogs cannot spread fifth disease.

Who is at risk for fifth disease?

Although anyone who has not had fifth disease can become ill, the disease is most common in children. About 50% to 80% of adults are immune. Most people who get fifth disease are not very ill and recover fully. Some individuals with sickle-cell disease, chronic anemia, or immune system deficiencies may become seriously ill and require medical attention.

Pregnant women should consult their health care provider. Usually there are no serious complications for a pregnant woman or her baby as a result of exposure to fifth disease. Most pregnant women who do become ill with fifth disease have only a mild illness and there are no adverse effects on the fetus. Occasionally severe anemia can occur in the unborn baby, which may result in a miscarriage. Miscarriage occurs in less than 5% of all pregnant women infected with fifth disease and is most common during the first half of pregnancy.

How is fifth disease diagnosed?

A health care provider usually makes a diagnosis of fifth disease based on the symptoms. A blood test for the virus antibody is also available.

How is fifth disease treated?

Fifth disease is usually a mild illness that resolves on its own among children and adults who are otherwise healthy. Most people with fifth disease require only general comfort measures to help ease the symptoms. Pregnant women or patients with anemia or immune deficiencies may require specialized treatment.

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How can the spread of fifth disease be reduced?

1. Use good handwashing techniques often (see below).
2. Avoid sharing personal articles that may be contaminated with saliva, such as drinking cups and eating utensils.
3. Use a sanitizing solution (1/4 teaspoon of bleach per quart of cool water) on toys and surfaces.
4. Dispose of facial tissues properly. Teach children to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue, or their upper sleeve -not their hands- when they cough or sneeze.

Exclude from group setting?

Excluding a child diagnosed with fifth disease from school or child care is not necessary because the child is no longer contagious once the rash appears.

Handwashing

Handwashing is one of the primary ways to stop the spread of disease. The following steps are recommended for good handwashing:

1. Turn on warm water.
2. Apply soap to hands.
3. Rub soap over tops and palms of hands and around fingernails. Scrub hands for approximately 20 seconds.
4. Rinse hands with running water.
5. Dry hands with a clean, disposable towel.
6. Repeat the process if preparing foods.

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