

FACTS ABOUT HAND, FOOT, & MOUTH DISEASE (HFMD)

What is hand, foot, and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a common illness among infants and children. It is caused most often by the coxsackie A16 virus, although a few other viruses can also cause the disease. It is most common in the summer and early fall. Although the name of this illness sounds similar to hoof-and-mouth disease of cattle, HFMD is a completely unrelated illness caused by a different virus.

What are the symptoms of hand, foot, and mouth disease?

HFMD begins with a low fever, poor appetite, and often a sore throat. One or two days after the fever, sores develop in the mouth, usually on the tongue, gums, and inside the cheeks. These sores begin as red spots and often develop into ulcers. A blistered rash may then appear on the palms of the hands, fingers, soles of the feet, and occasionally the buttocks. The fluid in these blisters contains the virus. A person with HFMD may have only the rash or only the mouth sores. Some infected people have no symptoms but may still shed the virus in their stool. The infection usually goes away without any serious complications within 7 to 10 days. In rare occasions, complications of viral meningitis or encephalitis may occur.

How is hand, foot, and mouth disease spread?

The virus can be passed through saliva, through the fluid from blisters on the hands and feet, or through the person's feces. A person is most contagious during the first week of the illness. The time between becoming infected and the start of symptoms is between 3 and 7 days. It is not transmitted to or from pets or other animals.

Who may become ill with hand, foot, and mouth disease?

HFMD can affect anyone. Most cases occur in children under 10 years old. Infection results in immunity to the specific virus that caused the illness, but since HFMD can be caused by several different viruses, a person is not immune to the disease as a whole.

How is hand, foot, and mouth disease diagnosed?

A physician usually distinguishes HFMD from other causes of mouth sores by the age of the patient, the symptoms reported, and the appearance of the rash and the sores. A throat swab or stool specimen is possible, but since the test takes 2 to 4 weeks to provide an answer it is usually not done.

How is hand, foot and mouth disease treated?

No specific treatment is available for hand, foot, and mouth disease. Symptoms may be treated to provide relief from fever, aches, or pain from the mouth ulcers. Aspirin should not be used for infants, children or teenagers because they may be at risk for contracting Reye Syndrome.

-more-

How can the spread of hand, foot, and mouth disease be reduced?

1. Make sure that all children and adults use good handwashing practices especially after diaper changing or using the toilet.
2. Thoroughly sanitize all toys, especially those that are put in the mouth. Any toy that a child has mouthed should be removed from the play area until it has been cleaned and sanitized. Wash toys first with soapy water. Then, use a sanitizing solution (such as 1/4 teaspoon of bleach per quart of cool water) on toys and other potentially contaminated surfaces.

Exclude from group setting?

As a general rule, ill persons do not need to be excluded from child care or school. Exclusion may not prevent additional cases since the virus may be excreted for weeks after the symptoms have disappeared. Also some persons excreting the virus may have no symptoms. However, some benefit may be gained by excluding children who have blisters in their mouths and drool, or those who have weeping lesions on their hands that cannot be covered. If a child is particularly uncomfortable, some rest at home might be needed. Outbreaks in child care facilities usually coincide with an increased number of cases in the community.

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.

HFMD_factsheet_rev_110411cdos

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant as a substitute for consultation with your health care provider. These fact sheets are reviewed annually. This document is not valid after 06/2012.