



Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease

What is hand, foot, and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a viral infection most often caused by a virus from the enterovirus group called coxsackie virus. It causes a fever and blister-like rash that, as the name says, occurs on the hands, feet, and in the mouth. Symptoms can also include poor appetite, runny nose, and sore throat. The rash usually develops one or two days after these symptoms occur. Persons can be infected with the virus and have no symptoms.

Who gets HFMD?

Anyone can get HFMD, but it usually occurs in infants and young children.

How is the virus that causes HFMD spread?

The virus is spread from person to person by direct contact with body fluids from infected persons. Body fluids that can spread the virus are nose and throat fluids, fluid from blisters, and stools of infected persons. People are most contagious during the first week of illness. HFMD is not spread to or from animals, and should not be confused with a different disease that affects cattle, sheep, and pigs called “foot and mouth disease”.

How soon will someone become ill after getting infected?

The usual period between becoming infected and having symptoms (the “incubation period”) is three to seven days. Fever is often the first symptom.

How long can an infected person carry the coxsackie virus?

The coxsackie virus may be found in the throat of an infected person for two weeks (even if there are no lesions in the mouth) and in the stool for one month after infection. Infected persons who do not appear to be ill can also spread the virus to others.

How is HFMD diagnosed?

Physicians are able to diagnose most cases based on symptoms.

What is the treatment for HFMD?

No specific treatment is available for this or other enterovirus infections. Treatment is based on the symptoms to relieve fever, aches, or pain from the mouth sores.

Should an infected person be excluded from school or work?

You should stay home while you are sick with hand, foot, and mouth disease.

What precautions should pregnant women take?

Pregnant women should carefully wash their hands after handling wet diapers or having contact with urine or saliva. Pregnant women working in childcare centers should avoid contact with oral secretions of babies or young children. Babies born to mothers who are contagious near the time of delivery can become infected but will usually only have mild illness. Rarely a severe and life-threatening infection can occur, usually during the first two weeks of life. Pregnant women should ask their doctor about coxsackie virus infections.

What can be done to stop the spread of hand, foot, and mouth disease?

Good personal hygiene including good hand washing is the best way to prevent infection with the coxsackie virus, especially after contact with a likely source such as after changing a diaper. Contaminated environmental objects should be cleaned with soap and water, followed by disinfection with a bleach solution. One gallon of water plus 1/4 cup of bleach will kill viruses on surfaces, however this solution needs to be mixed daily to be effective. Health care workers should wear disposable gloves when handling sheets or clothes soiled with feces or urine of persons who are ill.