

INFECTIOUS DISEASE FACT SHEET

FIFTH DISEASE (PARVOVIRUS B19, ERYTHEMA INFECTIONOSUM, “SLAPPED CHEEKS SYNDROME”)

What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is a common, usually mild viral infection caused by parvovirus B19, and is commonly called “slapped cheek” syndrome. Anyone can get fifth disease, but it is most common in children between the ages of five and 14 years old. It is usually seen in late winter and spring.

What are the symptoms of fifth disease?

Many children infected with the virus do not show symptoms, or the symptoms are mild which often go unnoticed. Common symptoms include a fever, runny nose, sore throat, headache and mild gastrointestinal pain, including nausea and diarrhea. In two to five days, a rash appears with the following characteristics:

- Distinctive rash that has a “slapped cheek” appearance. Occasionally the rash will extend over the bridge of the nose or around the mouth. This is more common in children than adults.
- Red, lace-like rash on the torso, arms and legs may appear one to four days later
- Rash may come and go over the next one to three weeks and may itch.
- Rash may be exaggerated by exposure to sunlight, heat (e.g. baths) or emotional stress.

In children, the infection is usually mild and lasts for only a few weeks. Teenagers and adults may have joint pain which can cause difficulty in walking and bending joints such as wrists, knees, ankles, fingers and shoulders.

The majority of adults who had fifth disease in childhood will not get it again if exposed to an infected person.

Some people are at a higher risk of serious complications if they become infected. They include:

- People with chronic hemolytic anemias, such as sickle cell disease
- People with weakened immune systems
- Pregnant people as they can pass the infection onto their developing baby

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How does fifth disease spread?

The virus that causes Fifth disease spreads from person-to-person through droplets in the air or through contact with, mucus or droplets from the nose or mouth of someone who is infected. . The virus can also spread through contact with infected blood and blood products.

Infected persons are contagious for about seven to 10 days before the start of the rash. Once the rash develops, the person is usually no longer contagious, and the infection cannot spread to others.

How can fifth disease be prevented?

There is no vaccine available to prevent fifth disease. The most effective method of prevention is frequent hand washing and avoiding sharing items with others, such as cups, glasses and utensils.

Children with the rash are no longer contagious, and they may continue to attend school or childcare and perform regular activities if they are fever-free and feel well enough to attend.

How is fifth disease treated?

There is no treatment for fifth disease. Rest, drinking plenty of water, and over-the-counter pain relief medications are usually all that is needed to help with symptoms such as fever, pain or itching.