

INFECTIOUS DISEASE FACT SHEET

FIFTH DISEASE AND PREGNANCY

What is fifth disease and how does it affect pregnancy?

Fifth disease is a common, usually mild viral infection caused by parvovirus B19. It is a respiratory infection seen most often in children but can also develop in adults. In children, it may start with flu-like symptoms, fever, and headache, followed a few days later by a rosy to bright red “slapped-cheek” rash that becomes lacy and net-like in appearance. After about one week, the rash may spread to the trunk and limbs.

For most pregnant people, exposure to fifth disease does not usually affect the baby. Several circumstances have to be in place for there to be a risk of harm to the fetus:

- **The pregnant person must be susceptible to fifth disease.** Fortunately, more than half of all adults have already had fifth disease and are now protected from getting it again
- **The infection must spread from the pregnant person to their fetus.** If a pregnant person contracts fifth disease, the infection often does not spread to their baby. Research has found that in 67 to 83% of the cases, the infection does not spread from an infected person to their fetus.
- **The infected fetus may not develop complications.** If the infection does spread to the fetus, one in 10 of these infections results in complications such as inflammation of the heart or anemia (not enough red blood cells).

If a pregnant person is infected with fifth disease, there is a very small risk of a miscarriage during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. After the 20-week point, it is very rare. Infection in a pregnant person does not increase the risk of birth defects in babies.

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.

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- 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.

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 or medication available to prevent fifth disease. As with most viruses, frequent handwashing and avoiding sharing items with others (e.g. cups, glasses, utensils) is your best protection.

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

How is fifth disease treated?

There is no treatment for fifth disease, the illness resolves on its own. 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. If you are pregnant, have a weakened immune system or certain blood disorders, it is recommended to consult with a doctor.