Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease- Factsheet

What is hand, foot, and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a common illness of infants and children. A group of viruses called enteroviruses causes the illness. HFMD is often confused with foot-and-mouth disease of cattle, sheep and swine. Although the names sound alike, the two diseases are not related at all and are caused by different viruses.

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

Symptoms usually begin 3 to 6 days after exposure to the virus. Symptoms may include fever, a sore throat, painful sores in the mouth, and a rash. The skin rash appears as flat or raised red spots, some with blisters. The rash is usually not itchy, and it is usually seen on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. It can also appear on the buttocks, legs, and arms. Most people get better within 7-10 days.

How is hand, foot, and mouth disease spread?

HFMD spreads easily through person-to-person contact; through the droplets made when someone sick with HFMD coughs, sneezes, or talks; or by contact with a surface or object that's been contaminated by an infected person's saliva (drool), nasal mucus, blister fluid, or poop.

How long are people contagious?

A person with HFMD is most contagious during the first week that they are sick. However, sometimes a person may still be able to spread the virus for weeks, even if s/he no longer looks or feels sick.

Who gets hand, foot, and mouth disease?

HFMD is more common in children under 5 years old, but anyone can get it. Not everyone who is infected becomes ill. A person can get HFMD more than once because there are different viruses that cause this illness.

What treatment is available for people with hand, foot, and mouth disease?

No specific treatment is available for this type of virus. Most people get better on their own. Over-the-counter medicines like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help with fever, aches, or pain from the mouth ulcers. Never give aspirin to children. Drinking water can feel painful with mouth sores, but make sure persons with HFMD stay hydrated.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work, or daycare?

Generally, people with HFMD can go back to school, work, or daycare when they have no fever, have no uncontrolled drooling with mouth sores, and feel well enough to participate in usual activities. People with HFMD should pay special attention to properly washing their hands.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting hand, foot, and mouth disease?

- Wash hands frequently with water and soap, especially after changing diapers, using the toilet, blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; before touching your face; and before and after caring for someone who is sick. Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.
- Clean “dirtied” or contaminated surfaces and soiled items first with soap and water, and then disinfect them with a dilute solution of chlorine-containing bleach (made by mixing approximately ¼ cup of bleach with one gallon of water).
- Avoid close contact (e.g., kissing, hugging, sharing utensils) with children with HFMD.