

Fifth Disease (Parvovirus Infection)

What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is an infection that, in children, often appears as a bright red rash on the face. It is sometimes called "slapped face" disease.

What causes fifth disease and how is it spread?

A virus called parvovirus B19 causes fifth disease.

A person with fifth disease can spread it to others by coughing or sneezing. Sometimes you can get the disease just by touching the saliva or nasal discharge (e.g. a wet hanky or tissue) of a person with the disease and then touching your own eyes or mouth. A pregnant woman who gets fifth disease can pass it to her unborn baby.

Who can get fifth disease?

You can get fifth disease at any age, although it is more common in young children.

Once you have had fifth disease, you are protected or immune from getting sick with the virus again.

About half of all adults have already had fifth disease, and therefore can't get it again. However, most preschoolers and school-age children have not had it. If the virus is around, children are more likely than adults to get it.

What are the symptoms of fifth disease?

Many of the symptoms, including fever, rash, cough or runny nose, also occur in illnesses caused by other viruses. About a quarter of all people who get fifth disease have no symptoms.

These are the most common signs of fifth disease that are different from other illnesses:

- About three weeks after being exposed to the virus, a red rash may appear on the face. This rash has a shape that makes it look like the cheeks have been slapped, while the area around the mouth looks pale. These signs are usually seen only in children.
- A red, spotty, lace-like rash may appear on the arms and may spread to the chest, back and thighs. The rash may fade away and then come back or get worse when the person is exposed to heat, such as a warm bath or direct sunlight. The rash can persist for several weeks. For some persons, the rash may not appear at all, or it may look different in adults.
- Adults may have pain in their joints. This may be the only symptom for infected adults.

Is fifth disease serious?

Fifth disease is usually mild. However, there are three groups of persons at risk for serious complications if they become infected:

- Persons with chronic hemolytic anemias (like sickle cell disease) can have life-threatening complications.
- Persons whose immune systems do not work well.
- Pregnant women - If a pregnant woman is infected, she can pass the infection on to the developing baby. When this happens in the first half of the pregnancy, there is a very small chance that the baby can die in the womb. Death in the womb occurs very rarely later in pregnancy.

Babies born to mothers who were infected while pregnant do NOT have an increased risk of birth defects.

What should I do if my child or I have been in contact with fifth disease?

If you have been exposed to someone with fifth disease you should watch for cold-like symptoms over the next 4 to 20 days.

If such symptoms occur, cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze to prevent airborne droplets from spreading. Wash your hands often to avoid spreading the virus to others. After using tissues throw them directly into the garbage and wash your hands again. For more information see BC HealthFile [#85 Hand Washing for Parents and Kids](#).

If you are pregnant, or have anemia or a condition that lowers your resistance to infections, you should tell your doctor that you have been in contact with someone who has fifth disease.

What should I do if I get fifth disease?

If you think that your child has fifth disease, and you are in one of the groups at risk for complications, you should contact your doctor. Other illnesses caused by viruses, such as rubella or measles, can have similar symptoms. Sometimes a blood test may be needed to tell the difference.

General treatment

For generally healthy people, home treatment is usually the only care needed for fifth disease. Antibiotics are not used to treat fifth disease because a virus rather than bacteria causes the illness.

If you have fifth disease, by the time the rash appears you will no longer be contagious or able to spread the virus to others. Therefore, once the rash appears, there is no reason to stay away from work or school as long as you feel well.

Home treatment may include:

- Drinking plenty of liquids to prevent dehydration;
- Reducing fever and relieving headache and joint pain with acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®). **Note: Acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) is NOT recommended for children.**
- Preventing scratching by trimming fingernails and wearing gloves at night to help prevent scratching during sleep;
- Reducing itchiness by applying a lotion or cream to the rash, and wearing loose-fitting cotton clothing. Ask your pharmacist or public health nurse about lotions and other remedies to take away the itching. Taking a non-prescription antihistamine may help if the itching is very bothersome. These are not recommended for children under 6 years of age. These medications can make children and adults sleepy.



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