

Fifth Disease (Parvovirus B19)

What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is also known as “slapped cheek syndrome” because of the rash it causes on the face. It is a very common viral infection of the respiratory system caused by parvovirus B19. Antibiotics will not help treat fifth disease.

Fifth disease is a very common infection in child care settings, schools and the general community.

What are the symptoms?

Most children with fifth disease have very mild symptoms and sometimes no symptoms at all. Generally, it starts as a mild fever or cold followed by a very red rash on the cheeks, making the face look as if it has been slapped. This is followed one to four days later with a red, lace-like rash that spreads first on the torso and arms, and then on the rest of the body. The rash may last from one to three weeks and can vary with changes in temperature and exposure to sun. Usually, by the time the rash appears kids are feeling well and are back to their usual activities.

Adults typically get a more severe case, with fever and some joint pain. At least 50% of adults have had fifth disease in childhood and will not get it again.

How does it spread?

The virus spreads the same way as a cold virus does. You can get the disease after coming in contact with secretions from the nose, mouth or throat of somebody who has it. The fluids can be found on objects, hands, or in the air.

There is no reason to isolate someone with fifth disease. It does not prevent the spread of the infection. Once the rash appears the person can no longer spread the infection.

Can fifth disease be serious?

Not usually, but some people may have complications:

- Severe anemia may occur in children with weakened immunity (such as leukemia) or with certain blood disorders (like sickle cell anemia).
- There is a very low risk for pregnant women that their unborn child may become infected and develop anemia before birth.

What can parents do?

- Remind your child to wash their hands often with soap and water, cover their cough and sneezes, and not to share utensils or drinking cups.
- Your child may continue attending a childcare facility or school if feeling well enough to take part in the activities.

What if you are pregnant?

At least 50 % of pregnant women have had fifth disease in the past and are already immune, in which case they will not get it again or pass it to their unborn baby. If you are not immune and are exposed to fifth disease there is a small risk that your baby may be affected. Usually exposure to this virus does not result in serious harm to baby.

- If you are unsure of your immune status, and are either pregnant or planning a baby, you should discuss any concerns with your healthcare provider. A blood test may be considered to check your immunity.
- If you are pregnant and know you have been exposed to fifth disease, contact your health care provider.
- Frequent hand-washing and not sharing cups/utensils can help prevent infection.
- For more information: www.motherisk.org

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