

Hand, foot and mouth disease

Hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) is caused by a virus (usually from the coxsackie group of enteroviruses, particularly coxsackie virus A16). It causes blisters on the hands and feet, in the mouth and often in the 'nappy' area. It is generally only a mild disease that lasts seven to ten days.

HFMD is more common during warmer weather and tends to spread easily between children. There is no connection between this disease and the foot and mouth disease that affects cattle and some other animals.

HFMD occurs mainly in children under ten years of age, but can also affect older children and adults. Outbreaks may occur in childcare settings. By the time they are adults, most people have been infected with the virus that causes this disease.

Spread of hand, foot and mouth disease

This infection is spread by direct contact with fluid from the skin blisters, nose and throat discharges (including saliva, sputum or nasal mucus), droplets (sneezing, coughing) and faeces (stools). Good personal hygiene is important to prevent spread of the infection to others.

The skin blisters of HFMD are infectious until they become crusty and there is no fluid in the blisters. The virus may also be shed in the faeces (poo) for several weeks after the blisters resolve.

Symptoms of HFMD

People usually develop symptoms between three to seven days after being infected.

The most common symptoms include:

- High temperature (fever)
- Sore throat
- Small, blister-like lesions that may occur on the inside of the mouth, sides of the tongue, palms of the hands, fingers, soles of the feet and 'nappy' area.
- Children are often irritable, tired, and may be off their food.

Very rarely, the virus can affect the lining of the brain or spinal cord, leading to more severe symptoms such as seizures, confusion, unsteadiness, and weakness.

Diagnosis of HFMD

Diagnosis is usually made by your local doctor based on symptoms. Other tests are not usually required, but occasionally throat or faeces samples may be taken.

Treatment for HFMD

HFMD is a mild illness that resolves within a few days. There is no specific treatment and usually none is required.

Use paracetamol (not aspirin) as directed for fever and any discomfort. Offer plenty of fluids, but avoid orange juice, which is acidic and may cause pain with mouth ulcers. Allow blisters to dry naturally. Do not pierce blisters, as the fluid within them is infectious.

If a child with HFMD complains of severe headache, if fever persists, or if there are any worrying symptoms, consult your local doctor immediately.

Prevention of HFMD

Good personal hygiene is essential to prevent the spread of HFMD to others, both for those infected and their carers. This includes:

- Washing hands carefully with soap and water after contact with the blister-like lesions, after handling nose and throat discharges, and after contact with faeces such as with toileting and nappy changing.
- Using separate eating and drinking utensils.
- Avoid sharing items of personal hygiene (e.g. towels, washers and toothbrushes) and clothing (particularly shoes and socks).
- Thoroughly wash and clean any soiled clothing and surfaces or toys that may have been contaminated.
- Teach children about cough and sneeze etiquette, immediate disposal of tissues, and to wash hands afterwards.

Children with HFMD should be excluded from school and childcare centres until all of the blisters have dried. To assist in prevention of spread, parents should report the illness to the director of the childcare centre or school principal.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Child health care workers
- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- Department of Health Victoria, Victorian Government – Environmental Health Unit Tel. 1300 761 874

Things to remember

- Hand, foot and mouth disease is usually a mild viral illness which is common in children.
- Diagnosis is made by a local doctor, and there is no specific treatment.
- Good personal hygiene is important to prevent spread of the disease.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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