

What is hand, foot and mouth (HFMD) Disease?

Hand, foot and mouth disease is caused by a virus, usually one called coxsackievirus A16. It is a very common infection. About 50% of adults will have been infected with the virus in the past, often without being aware of it.

People can become infected at any time, but it is most common in children under 10. Every two or three years there seems to be an increase.

There are often outbreaks in nurseries, playgroups and schools where young children have lots of close contact with one another.

Is HFMD the same as foot-and-mouth disease?

No - foot and mouth disease causes illness in cattle, sheep and pigs. Although the names are similar the two diseases are not at all related, and are caused by different viruses.

What are the symptoms?

Like many virus infections, HFMD often starts with a feeling of being unwell for a day or so. This may include a slight fever, poor appetite, feeling off-colour, and often a sore throat.

One to two days later sores begin to develop in the mouth, on the tongue, gums and inside of cheeks. A skin rash

also develops with flat or raised red spots, some with blisters. The spots are similar to chickenpox, but a lot smaller. The rash does not itch, and is usually found on the palms of the hands and on the soles of the feet.

The lesions usually last for 7-10 days.

Very occasionally HFMD can also cause viral meningitis, when the person has fever, headache, a stiff neck, and may need to be in hospital for a few days.

How does it spread?

The infection is spread by direct contact with nose and throat discharges (when sneezing, coughing and kissing), saliva, fluid from the blisters, and also by contact with the faeces of infected persons.

The incubation period is 3-7 days. (This means it takes 3-7 days to develop symptoms after being in contact with an infected person.)

Is there any treatment?

There is no treatment for the actual infection. Paracetamol may be used for relief of the fever, and preparations for mouth ulcers may be useful if the sores in the mouth are painful.

The affected person should drink plenty of fluids. Cool and sloppy foods like yoghurt and ice cream may be preferred.

Can children still go to nursery/school?

Yes. The illness is very mild, and children need only remain off if they are feverish and/or feeling unwell. The virus will remain in the faeces for several weeks.

Lots of people may have the illness without having any symptoms, so at any given time, there will probably always be someone who is infectious. It is impossible therefore to completely prevent catching HFMD.

Can you catch it more than once?

People usually become immune to the virus that causes the illness. However, it is possible to have HFMD more than once, because several different viruses can cause it.

What can I do to prevent HFMD?

The most important preventive measure is a good standard of hygiene.

- Cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- Wash toys regularly in hot soapy water, especially when in contact with saliva.

- Wash hands after:
 - ◆ changing nappies
 - ◆ visiting the toilet
 - ◆ nose blowing

How should hands be washed?

Always use warm, running water and a mild, preferably liquid, soap. (It is not necessary to use soaps labelled as antiseptic or antibacterial.)

- Wet hands and apply a small amount of soap
- Rub hands together vigorously for 10-15 seconds
- Pay special attention to areas between fingers, finger tips, and palms.
- Rinse hands under warm running water

Dry thoroughly on a clean dry towel.

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