Hand, foot & mouth disease information sheet

Hand, foot & mouth disease

Hand foot and mouth disease is caused by a virus (usually 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.
It is more common during warmer weather and tends to spread easily between children.
This infection is spread by direct contact with fluid from the skin blisters, nose and throat discharges, droplets (sneezing, coughing) and faeces (stools). Good personal hygiene is important to prevent spread of the infection to others.
There is no connection between this disease and the foot and mouth disease that affects cattle and some other animals.

Who gets hand, foot & mouth disease?

Most people have been infected with the virus which causes this disease by the time they are adults. So it is generally just a small percentage of children who get features of disease after infection.

Signs & symptoms

People usually develop symptoms between three to seven days after being infected.
The most common signs and symptoms are:

- a high temperature (fever)
- a 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.
How long is it infectious?

The skin blisters of hand, foot and mouth disease are infectious until they become crusty and there is no fluid in the blisters. The virus may also be shed in the faeces for several weeks after the blisters resolve.

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

- washing hands carefully after contact with the blister-like lesions, after handling nose and throat discharges, and after contact with faeces such as with nappy changing
- allowing blisters to dry naturally. Do not pierce blisters, as the fluid within is infectious
- using separate eating and drinking utensils.

Children with hand, foot and mouth disease should be excluded from school and child care centres until all the blisters have dried.

How do you treat hand foot & mouth disease?

There is no specific treatment for hand, foot and mouth disease.

Use paracetamol (not aspirin) as directed for fever and any discomfort.

The disease itself is generally mild. If a child with hand, foot and mouth disease complains of severe headache, if fever persists, or if there are any other worrying symptoms consult your local doctor immediately.

Further information

- Your local doctor
- Better Health Channel
- Victorian Department of Health, Telephone 1300 651 160