

Fifth Disease (Erythema Infectiosum) Fact Sheet

What is it?

Fifth disease, also called “slapped cheek disease” and erythema infectiosum, is caused by a virus called Parvovirus B19. It is commonly a mild illness. Fifth disease usually affects children but can also affect adults. More than half the adult population has had the illness and is now immune.

What are the Symptoms?

In children, Parvovirus B19 infection most commonly presents with flu-like illness, runny nose, cough, mild fever and headache, followed in one to four days by a rosy-to-bright red “slapped-cheek” looking rash. The rash becomes lacy and net-like in appearance. After about a week, it may spread to the trunk and limbs. The rash lasts up to three weeks and can come and go abruptly following exposure to heat or cold. In adults, the illness may be more severe and include fever and joint pain; however 20-25% of infected adults and children will have no symptoms.

What is the Incubation Period?

A susceptible person usually becomes ill 4 to 14 days after being infected with the virus, but sometimes as long as 20 days after.

When is it Contagious?

People are contagious for 7 to 10 days before the onset of the rash. Because they are contagious before a rash is evident, children with Fifth Disease should be allowed to attend school, provided they are well enough to partake in all activities.

How is it Spread?

Parvovirus B19 is most commonly transmitted by contact with respiratory secretions from the nose and mouth, or by hand-to-mouth contact. It can also be transmitted through infected serum, ie: blood transfusions and transplantations, or from mother to fetus.

Are there Complications?

- Fifth Disease poses no risk of significant illness for healthy people.
- Fifth Disease may make a blood condition like leukemia or sickle cell anemia worse.
- A person with a weakened immune system may develop chronic anemia.
- If a woman is pregnant, there is a slight risk that the baby could develop anemia before birth. Children born to infected mothers usually do not suffer long-term complications; however, further studies are required to assess this.
- Any pregnant woman who is exposed to Fifth Disease, or develops signs or symptoms, should consult with her physician. A blood test can determine if a woman is infected, susceptible, or immune. This information will determine the need for follow-up care.

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How is it Controlled?

- Good personal hygiene is important.
- Wash hands carefully after coughing and sneezing, after blowing your nose and handling soiled tissues, and before eating or preparing food.
- Avoid sharing drinking cups or eating utensils.
- Teach children to cough and sneeze into their sleeve or a tissue, and to properly dispose of soiled tissues.

Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 x349. Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | www.hpepublichealth.ca

Sources of Information

- Canadian Pediatric Society
- Ontario Ministry of Health- www.healthyontario.com
- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

Bibliography

- Chin, J., Editor “Control of Communicable Diseases in Man” American Public Health Association.
- American Academy of Pediatrics, Report of the Committee of Infectious Diseases 2003 Red Book.

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