

What is hand, foot and mouth disease?

Hand, foot and mouth disease is a mild viral illness that can occur at any age, but occurs most often in children younger than ten. The disease is characterized by vesicles (small blisters that contain clear fluid) inside the mouth, on the gums and on the side of the tongue. On rare occasions, people with the virus that causes hand, foot and mouth disease may develop viral meningitis. Infants who develop blisters in the mouth may stop nursing and become dehydrated. Most cases of hand, foot and mouth disease occur in summer and fall.

Who is at risk for hand, foot and mouth disease?

Everyone is at risk for hand, foot and mouth disease, but it usually occurs in children younger than ten. Not everyone who is infected becomes ill.

What are the symptoms of hand, foot and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease usually starts with a fever, poor appetite, a vague feeling of being unwell (malaise), and sore throat. One or two days after fever starts, painful sores usually develop in the mouth. They begin as small red spots that blister and that often become ulcers. The sores are often in the back of the mouth. A skin rash develops over one to two days. The rash has flat or raised red spots, sometimes with blisters. The rash is usually on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet; it may also appear on the knees, elbows, buttocks or genital area.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear three to six days after exposure.

How is hand, foot and mouth disease spread?

The disease is spread by contact with nose and throat discharges, blister fluid and feces of infected people.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Generally, a person with hand, foot, and mouth disease is most contagious during the first week of illness. A person with hand, foot and mouth disease can transmit the virus through nose and throat discharges, contact with the rash or blisters, and feces during the acute stage of the illness. The virus can continue to be transmitted in the feces perhaps as long as several weeks after the onset of infection when a person has no apparent illness.

How is a person diagnosed?

A health care provider can diagnose hand, foot and mouth disease. Laboratory tests are not usually needed to diagnose hand, foot, and mouth disease.

What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment for hand, foot, and mouth disease. People with the infection should rest and may be given medication and liquids to control fever and pain associated with the disease. Do not give aspirin to children with hand, foot and mouth disease. Young children can become dehydrated easily if they are not able to tolerate drinking and may need supportive fluids through an IV in their vein.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Immunity to the specific virus type probably is acquired after infection; however, the duration of the immunity is unknown. Current immunity to one type of virus will not prevent infection from a different virus type.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have hand, foot and mouth disease?

Children with symptoms should not attend child care or school until the fever is no longer present and the vesicles begin to subside. Adults should also be excluded from work. Talk with your health care provider if you are not sure when you should return to work or children should return to child care or school.

What can be done to prevent the spread of hand, foot and mouth disease?

Particular attention should be given to thorough hand washing following contact with nose and throat discharges and feces. Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces and soiled items, including toys, will help prevent the spread of disease. People should avoid close contact such as kissing, hugging, or sharing eating utensils or cups with people with hand, foot, and mouth disease.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndhealth.gov/disease or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resource: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/hand-foot-mouth/index.html