

Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease

What is hand, foot, and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease is a viral infection caused by a strain of Coxsackie virus which is common children but can also occur in young adults. It is characterized by fever, sores in the mouth, and a rash with blisters. The illness begins with a mild fever, poor appetite, malaise ("feeling sick"), and frequently a sore throat. One or 2 days after the fever begins, sores develop in the mouth. They begin as small red spots that blister and then often become ulcers. They are usually located on the tongue, gums, and inside of the cheeks. The skin rash develops over 1 to 2 days with flat or raised red spots, some with blisters. The rash does not itch, and it is usually located on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. It may also appear on the buttocks. A person may have only the rash or the mouth ulcers.

How is it spread?

The virus is spread by direct contact with nose and throat discharges and feces of infected people.

When and how long can someone spread the disease?

A person is contagious when the first symptoms appear and may continue until the blister-like skin lesions disappear. A person is most contagious during the first week of illness. The virus has been known to be shed in the stool for up to several weeks.

How is hand, foot and mouth disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis is generally suspected based upon the appearance of blister-like rash on hands and feet and mouth and a mild febrile illness. Although specific viral tests are available to confirm the diagnosis, they are rarely performed due to expense and length of time needed to complete the tests.

Does a prior infection with Coxsackie virus make a person immune?

Specific immunity can occur, but a second episode is possible from a different subtype of Coxsackie virus.

What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment. Antibiotics are not effective. Do not pop the blisters, they will heal better if left alone. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be used to control fever (do not use aspirin). Ensure adequate fluid intake. Extra fluids are needed when fever is present.

If mouth sores make swallowing uncomfortable, salt water mouth rinses (1/2 teaspoon salt to 1 glass of warm water) may be soothing. Do not swallow the salt water rinse.

Can there be complications associated with hand, foot and mouth disease?

The illness is typically mild lasting 3-5 days and goes away spontaneously. Complications of the illness are rare.

What can be done to prevent the spread of this disease?

No specific treatment is available for this infection. Symptomatic treatment is given to provide relief from fever, aches, or pain from the mouth ulcers. Preventive measures include frequent handwashing, especially after using bathroom; disinfection of contaminated surfaces by household cleaners; and washing soiled articles of clothing. Cover nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing and sneezing. Dispose of all soiled tissues.

Avoid group settings during the first few days of the illness. These measures may reduce the spread of infection, but they will not completely interrupt it.

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Clinic Nurse 510-643-7197 for advice