

Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease (Enteroviral vesicular stomatitis exanthem)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is hand, foot and mouth disease?

Hand, foot and mouth disease is a mild viral illness that can occur at any age, occurring most often in children under age 10. The disease is characterized by vesicles (small blisters which contain clear fluid) that occur inside the mouth, on the gums and on the side of the tongue. On rare occasions persons with the virus that causes hand, foot and mouth disease may develop viral meningitis. Infants who develop oral vesicles may stop nursing and become dehydrated. Most cases of hand, foot and mouth disease occur in summer and fall.

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

Hand, foot and mouth disease begins with a sore throat and a mild fever that can last from 1-3 days. Vesicles form on the inside of the mouth usually on the cheek, gums and on the side of the tongue. Vesicles later appear on the feet and the hands and occasionally on the buttocks, and may persist for 7-10 days.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 3-6 days after exposure.

How is hand, foot and mouth disease spread?

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

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

A person with hand, foot and mouth disease can transmit the virus through nose or throat discharges 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.

What is the treatment for hand, foot and mouth disease?

Hand, foot and mouth disease is self-limiting and does not require treatment. Persons with the disease should rest and may be given medication and liquids to control fever and pain associated with the disease.

Does past infection make a person immune?

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

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. Children with symptoms should not attend day care until the fever is no longer present and the vesicles begin to subside.