

Fact Sheet

Fifth Disease

What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is an infection caused by a virus, parvovirus. It received the name “fifth disease” because it was the fifth childhood illness identified. It is most common in children but can affect people of all ages.

How is fifth disease spread?

Fifth disease is spread through saliva and tiny droplets of fluid from the nose and throat of infected people when they talk, laugh, cough, or sneeze. It is most contagious in the 7 days before the rash develops.

What are the symptoms of fifth disease?

Infection usually begins with mild flu-like symptoms (headache, mild fever, fatigue), followed by a “slapped cheek” rash several days later. After 1 to 4 days, a red lacy rash appears on the rest of the body. The rash may be itchy and get worse with exposure to heat (such as bathing) or sunlight. It may come and go for weeks or months.

In adults (especially women) the illness may be more severe and include joint pain affecting the wrists, ankles and knees which can persist for months. Adults may not have the rash. Some people do not have any symptoms.

Fifth disease is usually mild for children and adults who are otherwise healthy, but for people with weakened immune systems, fifth disease infection can be serious. If a pregnant woman is infected, there can be a risk to the developing fetus. The doctor may recommend extra tests.

How do you know you have fifth disease?

Your health care provider can confirm a diagnosis of fifth disease by the telltale rash or, in some cases, by a blood test.

Most children recover fully without complications. With your health care provider’s advice, you can give your child over-the-counter medications to reduce fever, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others). Do not give aspirin to children or teenagers.

Antibiotics are not effective in treating viral illnesses such as fifth disease.

Can fifth disease be prevented?

There is no vaccine to prevent fifth disease. If your child is sick with fifth disease, keep him or her home and away from other children until the fever is gone.

Most people have antibodies to fifth disease by the time they are of school age, making them immune to a second infection. Even so, if one household member contracts the virus, make sure that all family members wash their hands frequently to prevent spread of the virus to anyone who isn’t immune.