

Hand, Foot & Mouth

Information Sheet

What is it?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a common viral illness of infants and children. Viruses from the group called *Enteroviruses* cause HFMD. HFMD is often confused with foot-and-mouth disease of cattle, sheep, and pigs. Although the names are similar, the two diseases are not related at all and are caused by different viruses.

Individual cases and outbreaks of HFMD occur worldwide, more frequently in summer and early autumn.

HFMD is not a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956 however Public Health may get involved if there is an outbreak of HFMD in the community or in an institutional setting, e.g. a childcare centre or rest home.

How does a person become infected?

Infection is spread from person to person by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat, blisters, or the faeces (poo, tutae) of infected persons. A person is most infectious during the first week of the illness but can pass the virus in their faeces for some weeks after infection. HFMD is not transmitted to or from pets or other animals.

HFMD usually occurs in children under 10 years old but may also occur in adults. Everyone is at risk of infection but most people who become infected do not get sick.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms appear about 3 to 7 days after being infected and last for 7 to 10 days. The illness has a sudden onset with;

- Mild fever (often the first symptom of HFMD)
- Poor appetite
- Feeling unwell
- Sore throat, followed by spots in the mouth
- Mouth sores/ulcers
- Spots on hands, feet, bottom and legs
- Tiredness and irritability

Fever begins 1-2 days before sores develop in the mouth beginning as small red spots that blister and may form ulcers. These are usually located on the tongue, gums and inside of the cheeks. Spots are small and red, similar to chickenpox, but don't itch.

How bad is it?

The illness is usually not serious. Nearly all cases recover without medical treatment in 7 to 10 days. Complications are unknown but rarely a patient may also develop mild viral meningitis in which the patient has fever, headache, stiff neck and back pain and may require hospitalisation.

For diagnosis, treatment and advice, you will need to see your doctor to rule out other causes for the rash.

Treatment

Give soft, easy to eat food, and plenty of fluids. Rest. Paracetamol or pamol can be used for pain relief.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your Public Health Nurse can give you advice on this. Anyone who has the infection should be kept away from other children. It is best to keep the child home from school/pre-school especially while they feel unwell and until the blisters have dried.

How do I avoid the illness?

As most people who are infected with *Enteroviruses* do not become sick, it can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. However, adhering to good personal hygiene can help to reduce your chances of becoming infected:

- Always wash and dry your hands thoroughly:
 - After going to the toilet
 - After changing children's nappies
 - After cleaning up faecal 'accidents'
 - After nursing or coming into contact with a patient with HFMD
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect surfaces and toys etc that have been contaminated with faeces or saliva using soap and water and then a bleach-based household cleaner (following the manufacturers instructions). Wear gloves when cleaning up.
- Flush any faeces away in the toilet and make sure the surrounding area is kept clean.
- Immediately remove and wash contaminated clothing and linen, using hot water and laundry detergent.
- Do not share spit, food, drink containers, or lip balm, etc.

For further information please contact:



MidCentral Public Health Service
Palmerston North: (06) 350 9110
Whanganui: (06) 348 1775

