

Fifth disease (Erythema infectiosum)

What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is an infection caused by the virus, parvovirus B19, which normally causes a mild rash in humans. It affects all age groups, but commonly children aged 5 to 15.

How is it spread?

Fifth disease is a highly contagious disease, and is spread by airborne droplets of respiratory secretions (saliva, sputum), often when people sneeze or cough. It only affects humans so people can not catch it from pets.



Symptoms of fifth disease

The characteristic symptom is the development of a “slapped-cheek” appearance, with evolution to a lacy, generalised rash on the body. The rash will usually resolve in 7-10 days.



Sometimes, for a couple of weeks before the rash, the person may have “flu-like” symptoms, such as malaise, a runny nose, sore throat, headache and occasionally a fever. It is during this stage of the illness that people are infectious.



The symptoms generally develop 4-20 days after the person is infected.

The majority of affected adults will also experience joint aches and pains, which can last for days to months.



How serious is fifth disease?

Most people who suffer fifth disease overcome the illness without any complications. However, people who are immunosuppressed or who suffer from pre-existing anaemia may develop severe, chronic anaemia, and often remain infectious for a prolonged period.

About 50% of adults have developed immunity to the virus, because of past infection (some without any symptoms), and are protected from getting it again.

For most pregnant women who develop fifth disease, there are no serious complications for them or their unborn baby. However, in less than 5% of all pregnant woman, parvovirus infection will cause the unborn baby to have severe anaemia and the mother may have a miscarriage. This more commonly occurs with disease acquired during the first half of pregnancy.

Treatment

For most people, symptomatic relief with fluids, paracetamol and rest is all that is required. If the skin rash is itchy, your doctor can advise you regarding the best creams and lotions to use.

As fifth disease is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not helpful.

For pregnant women, and for those who are immunosuppressed, who may have been in contact with someone with fifth disease, or who think they may have the disease, it is a good idea to contact your doctor. They may wish to perform a blood test to determine whether or not you are infected, and can discuss with you the treatment options available.

How can fifth disease be controlled?

At present, there is no vaccine available for fifth disease.

Maintaining good hygiene is the best way to stop the spread of parvovirus. Always cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing. Practise hand-washing after using tissues or handkerchiefs and after coughing or sneezing.

Clean surfaces contaminated by discharge from nose and throat.

As people are not infectious once the rash appears, they should not be excluded from child care, preschool, school or work.

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control.

Darwin	89228044
Katherine	89739049
Nhulunbuy	89870359
Tennant Creek	89624259
Alice Springs	89517549

Further fact sheets and treatment protocols are available at:
<http://www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc>