

What is Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is common in infants and young children. It usually causes fever, painful sores in the mouth, and a rash on the hands and feet. Most infected people recover in a week or two. Hand, foot, and mouth disease is a contagious illness that is caused by different viruses. It is commonly caused by coxsackievirus A16 (an enterovirus), and less often by other types of viruses. It is common in infants and children younger than 5 years old, because they do not yet have immunity to the viruses that cause HFMD. However, older children and adults can also get HFMD. It is more common for people to get HFMD during summer and early fall.

What Are the Symptoms of HFMD?

Symptoms of hand, foot, and mouth disease often include the following:

- Fever
- Reduced appetite
- Sore throat
- A feeling of being unwell
- Painful sores in the mouth that usually begin as flat red spots
- A rash of flat red spots that may blister on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, and sometimes the knees, elbows, buttocks, and/or genital area. The rash can last 7-10 days.

These symptoms usually appear in stages, not all at once. Also, not everyone will get all of these symptoms. Some people may show no symptoms at all, but they can still pass the virus to others.

Is HFMD Serious?

HFMD is usually not serious. The illness is typically mild, and nearly all people recover in 7 to 10 days without medical treatment. Complications are uncommon.

Is HFMD Contagious?

Yes. The viruses that cause HFMD can be found in an infected person's:

- Nose and throat secretions (such as saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus)
- Blister fluid
- Feces (poop)

HFMD spreads from an infected person to others through:

- Close contact, such as kissing, hugging, or sharing cups and eating utensils
- Coughing and sneezing
- Contact with feces, for example when changing a diaper
- Contact with blister fluid
- Touching objects or surfaces that have the virus on them

People with HFMD are most contagious during the first week of their illness. However, they may sometimes remain contagious for weeks after symptoms go away. Some people, especially adults, may not develop any symptoms, but they can still spread the viruses to others. This is why you should always try to maintain good hygiene, like washing hands often with soap and water, so you can minimize your chance of getting and spreading infections.

Who Is at Risk for HFMD?

HFMD mostly affects infants and children younger than 5 years old. Outbreaks may occur among groups of children especially in child care centers or nursery schools. Symptoms usually appear 3 to 5 days after exposure. However, older children and adults can get it, too. When someone gets HFMD, they develop immunity to the specific virus that caused their infection. However, because HFMD is caused by several different viruses, people can get the disease again.

Can HFMD Be Treated?

There is no specific treatment for HFMD. Fever and pain can be managed with over-the-counter fever reducers and pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. It is important for people with HFMD to drink enough fluids to prevent dehydration.

Can HFMD Be Prevented?

There is no vaccine to protect against HFMD. However, you can reduce the risk of getting infected with the viruses that cause HFMD by following a few simple steps:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds, especially after changing diapers, and help young children do the same
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands
- Avoid close contact such as kissing, hugging, and sharing cups and eating utensils with people who have HFMD
- Disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as toys and doorknobs, especially if someone is sick

Adapted from CDC and Maryland Department of Health