



Virgin Islands Department of Health

FACT SHEET

Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease

What is hand, foot and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a contagious viral illness that commonly affects infants and children in the United States and abroad. In the U.S. and other countries with temperate climates, HFMD occurs most often in summer and early autumn. While there is no vaccine to prevent the disease, there are simple steps you and your family can take to reduce the risk of getting sick.

What Are the Symptoms of HFMD?

Symptoms usually begin with a fever, poor appetite, malaise (feeling vaguely unwell), and often a sore throat. A couple of days after the fever starts, painful sores can develop in the mouth. A skin rash with flat or raised red spots can also develop, usually on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet and sometimes on the buttocks. This rash may blister, but it will not itch. Some people with HFMD may only have a rash; others may only have mouth sores. Other people with HFMD may show no symptoms at all.

Is HFMD Serious?

HFMD is usually not serious. The illness is typically mild, and nearly all patients recover in 7–10 days without medical treatment. Complications are uncommon. Rarely, an infected person can develop viral meningitis (characterized by fever, headache, stiff neck, or back pain) and may need to be hospitalized for a few days. Other rare complications can include polio-like paralysis or encephalitis (brain inflammation), which can be fatal.

Is HFMD Contagious?

Yes, HFMD is moderately contagious. The disease is spread by direct contact with nose and throat discharges, saliva, fluid from blisters, or the stool of infected persons.

People with HFMD are most contagious during the first week of their illness, but they can spread the virus that causes HFMD weeks after symptoms have gone away. It is also important to remember that people who get HFMD and show no symptoms of the disease can still spread the viruses that cause it.

How long is a person able to spread, hand food and mouth disease?

A person is most contagious during the first week of the illness. Fecal or stool shedding can continue for several weeks after onset of infection, but the respiratory tract shedding usually is limited to a week or less.

Who Is at Risk for HFMD?

HFMD mostly infects children younger than 10 years of age, but older children and adults can also get the disease. Individuals who get HFMD develop immunity to the specific virus that caused their infection. However, because HFMD can be caused by several different viruses, people can get the disease again if they are infected by one of the other HFMD-causing viruses.

Can HFMD Be Treated?

There is no specific treatment for HFMD. Fever and pain can be managed with over-the-counter fever reducers/pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. In addition, individuals with HFMD should drink enough fluids to prevent dehydration (loss of body fluids).

Can HFMD Be Prevented?

There is no vaccine to protect against HFMD. However, the risk of getting the disease can be reduced by

- Frequently washing hands, especially after diaper changes;
- Thoroughly cleaning objects and surfaces (toys, doorknobs, etc.) that may be contaminated with a virus that causes HFMD; and
- Avoiding close contact (like kissing and hugging) with people who are infected.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No. A person can become infected more than once.

What complications can happen from hand, foot and mouth disease?

Although hand, foot and mouth disease usually has no lasting complications, infants who develop oral vesicles may stop nursing and become dehydrated. On rare occasions persons with the virus that causes hand, foot and mouth disease may develop viral meningitis.

Is HFMD the Same as Foot-and-Mouth Disease?

No. HFMD is often confused with foot-and-mouth (also called hoof-and-mouth) disease, which affects cattle, sheep, and swine. For information on foot-and-mouth disease, visit www.healthvi.org and click on the CDC or USDA link.