

Fifth Disease (Erythema Infectiosum)

Fifth disease, also known as erythema infectiosum, is a common mild rash illness caused by human parvovirus B19. It usually occurs in students in late winter and early spring, often as clusters or outbreaks. The illness is characterized first by headache, body ache, no or low-grade fever, and chills. These symptoms are usually mild and resolve after a few days. Then, following a week of no symptoms, a bright red rash appears on the cheeks giving a “slapped face” appearance, sometimes with a “lacy” rash on the chest, arms, and legs. The rash is benign but can fade and recur for a few days or a few weeks, especially in response to changes in environmental temperature (e.g., hot bath, exposure to sunlight). Adults may not develop the rash but sometimes experience pains in the joints, especially the hands and feet. Approximately 25 percent of adults who contract the infection have no symptoms.

Although the symptoms are usually mild, and in many cases go unnoticed, the virus has been associated with miscarriages and stillbirths in infections acquired by a woman during pregnancy.

Fifth disease is spread by contact with respiratory secretions. It can also be spread from a pregnant woman to the fetus and through blood transfusion.

Individuals with mild Fifth disease are probably contagious in the form of respiratory secretions only early in the illness. Thus, by the time the rash appears, the individual is no longer contagious.

Students with a rash illness, especially if fever and/or other symptoms are present, should be referred to a health care provider for diagnosis. Students should not return to school until after the fever is gone (normally for 24 hours) and the child feels well enough to participate in normal activities. No treatment is indicated for this illness and once diagnosed, it is not necessary to exclude the ill student from school unless a fever is present or there is discomfort from symptoms.

Inform known pregnant women of potential exposure and make referral to licensed health care provider.

Students and staff with certain high-risk conditions (anemia, immunodeficiencies, and pregnancy) who may be exposed to Fifth disease should be advised that there might be some risk. Their licensed health care providers and local health jurisdictions are responsible for determining risk and recommending any intervention.