

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease

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Definition

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease — a **mild**, contagious viral infection common in young children — is characterized by sores in the mouth and a rash on the hands and feet. Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is most commonly caused by a coxsackievirus.

There's no specific treatment for hand-foot-and-mouth disease. You can reduce your risk of infection from hand-foot-and-mouth disease by practicing good hygiene, such as washing your hands often and thoroughly.

Symptoms

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease may cause some or all of the following signs and symptoms:

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Feeling of being unwell (malaise)
- Painful, red, blister-like lesions on the tongue, gums and inside of the cheeks
- A red rash, without itching but sometimes with blistering, on the palms, soles and sometimes the buttocks
- Irritability in infants and toddlers
- Loss of appetite

The usual period from initial infection to the onset of signs and symptoms (incubation period) is three to seven days. A fever is often the first sign of hand-foot-and-mouth disease, followed by a sore throat and sometimes a poor appetite and malaise. One or two days after the fever begins, painful sores may develop in the mouth or throat. A rash on the hands and feet and possibly on the buttocks can follow within one or two days.

When to see a doctor

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is usually a minor illness causing only a few days of fever and relatively mild signs and symptoms. Contact your doctor, however, if mouth sores or a sore throat keep your child from drinking fluids. Contact your doctor also if after a few days, your child's signs and symptoms worsen.

Causes

The most common cause of hand-foot-and-mouth disease is infection with the coxsackievirus A16. The coxsackievirus belongs to a group of viruses called nonpolio enteroviruses. Other enteroviruses sometimes cause hand-foot-and-mouth disease.

Oral ingestion is the main source of coxsackievirus infection and hand-foot-and-mouth disease. The illness spreads by person-to-person contact with an infected person's:

- Nasal secretions or throat discharge
- Saliva
- Fluid from blisters
- Stool
- Respiratory droplets sprayed into the air after a cough or sneeze
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Common in child care setting

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is most common in children in child care settings because of frequent diaper changes and potty training, and because little children often put their hands in their mouths.

Although your child is most contagious with hand-foot-and-mouth disease during the first week of the illness, the virus can remain in his or her body for weeks after the signs and symptoms are gone. That means your child still can infect others.

Some people, particularly adults, can pass the virus without showing any signs or symptoms of the disease.

Outbreaks of the disease are more common in summer and autumn in the United States and other temperate climates. In tropical climates, outbreaks occur year-round.