HAND, FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE

(Vesicular Stomatitis)

What is hand, foot and mouth disease?

Hand, foot and mouth disease is a common viral disease caused by certain types of coxsackie virus or enteroviruses. Although it most often affects children under ten years old, anyone can get it. Most infections happen in the summer and early fall.

What are the symptoms?

Usually a mild illness, symptoms may include fever, headache, sore throat, loss of appetite, fatigue, vomiting and/or diarrhea. The fever is generally low and can last up to seven days. About two days after the fever starts, small painful sores may develop on the inside of the mouth. A day or two later, a skin rash (small red spots) may appear on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, buttocks, and possibly other areas of the body. These red spots may turn into blisters. The fever, spots, and blisters all usually go away after about seven days. Not everyone who gets this disease gets all of these symptoms. Sometimes a person can have the infection and have no symptoms.

Although usually a mild illness for most people, some children may become very ill. Seek urgent care if the child:

- is vomiting and is showing any signs of
  - drowsiness or confusion
    or
  - dehydration (refusal to eat or drink; no tears when crying, small amount or no urine; dry skin, mouth and tongue)
- has rapid breathing
- has a severe sore throat
- has a severe headache.

How is it spread?

Those who have this disease are most contagious during the first week of illness, but the virus may be in the stool of an infected person for up to four weeks after infection. The virus is spread by contact with discharges from the nose and throat (through coughing or

direct contact) and by fecal-oral (feces to mouth) contact. This disease spreads very easily in childcare settings, and other places where children are close together.

Some examples of how the virus can be spread:

- Inadequate washing of hands after using the washroom or changing a diaper;
- Sharing food or eating utensils with an ill person;
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with the virus (like door handles, toys or other objects).

How is it diagnosed?

Clinical diagnosis is based on an assessment of clinical symptoms by a health care provider and laboratory testing.

Who is at risk of infection?

Anyone exposed to the virus can become infected. Young children and staff in group settings such as schools or childcare settings may be more likely to be exposed. Parents and contacts of infected children (ie: siblings and playmates) may also become ill.

How can hand, foot and mouth infection be prevented?

Practice good personal hygiene. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet or changing a diaper, and before preparing or eating food. Wash hands often to avoid spreading the virus to others-especially if there is contact with secretions from the nose or mouth. When soap and water are not available, and hands are not visibly dirty, alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be used. Only use hand sanitizers that have a 60% or more alcohol content. Always keep hand sanitizers out of the reach of children because they may be harmful if swallowed.

Use good environmental management. Thoroughly clean surfaces - especially in washrooms and diaper change areas. Flush or discard any stool in the toilet and clean surrounding area using hot water and detergent. Wash and disinfect toys and surfaces in the home and childcare setting regularly. A chlorine-based disinfectant is recommended.

Stay home if sick. Children should stay home from school and childcare if they have symptoms.

How is it treated?

Antibiotics will not help treat or cure this disease because it is a virus. When necessary, the fever and discomfort from the sores may sometimes be reduced with medication. Ask your pharmacist or your family healthcare provider which medication is recommended.

Do not pop the blisters - they will heal better if left alone. To alleviate discomfort, these sores can be treated

with different ointments. Ask your pharmacist or your family healthcare provider which medication is recommended.

Because the mouth sores can be painful, your child may not want to eat or drink. Keep them comfortable and give them plenty of cold, bland liquids (like milk or water), and bland soft foods. Don't give fizzy or tart drinks like pop and fruit juice as they will sting.

What is the Public Health response?

There is no Public Health response. Parents are advised to keep children home when ill with symptoms to prevent spread of the disease to others in school and childcare settings. No exclusion from school or daycare is required unless a child is not well enough to participate comfortably in all program activities.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your family physician, local Public Health office, or Telecare 811.

Useful websites:

Canadian Pediatric Society-Hand, foot and mouth disease | Caring for kids (cps.ca)

Last reviewed: September 2023