

News Release

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Hand, foot and mouth disease making life miserable for local children

According to the Knox County Health Department, children in several local school districts and daycare centers as well as some adults have recently experienced hand, foot, and mouth disease, a common illness caused by several viruses that appears most often between spring and fall.

“Unfortunately, there’s no vaccine to prevent hand, foot and mouth disease,” said Lorraine Bratton, RN, director of nursing for the health department. “Despite the miserable conditions, the disease is seldom serious and usually runs its course in a week or so, but the conditions can be uncomfortable, especially for young children and the people who take care of them.”

Infants and children under 5 years old are most likely to get hand, foot and mouth (HFMD) disease according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A fever and sore throat are early symptoms followed by painful sores in the mouth. The sores usually begin as small red spots, often in the back of the mouth, that blister and can become painful. A skin rash on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet may also develop over one or two days as flat, red spots, sometimes with blisters. It may also appear on the knees, elbows, buttocks or genital area. Sometimes, the illness is at first mistaken for diaper rash in babies.

HFMD tends to be harder on children than adults. “If you have an affected child, keep them hydrated,” said Bratton. “Babies and young children often won’t eat or drink because of the mouth sores which can make it painful to swallow.” She suggested staying away from acidic foods and beverages like orange juice and soda which can cause a burning sensation in the mouth, while popsicles, ice cream and cold water are soothing.

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There is no specific treatment for HFMD. Affected individuals can take over-the-counter medications to relieve pain and fever. Do not give aspirin to children. Mouthwashes or sprays can help with the mouth pain. If you are concerned about your symptoms you should contact your health care provider.

Health officials advise that affected individuals should stay home while they are sick with HFMD. After contact with HFMD, children come down with symptoms in 3-6 days. In many cases, they can return to child care or school after the fever is gone which usually takes 2 to 3 days. Children with widespread blisters may need to stay home until the blisters dry up. Bratton suggested talking with your healthcare provider if you are not sure when you should return to work or school. The same applies to children returning to daycare.

Bratton said people can lower their risk of getting HFMD by washing their hands often with soap and water, especially after changing diapers and using the bathroom. Frequently touched surfaces and soiled items, such as diaper-changing tables and toys should be cleaned and disinfected. Avoiding close contact such as kissing, hugging, or sharing eating utensils or cups with people who have the disease.

Generally, a person with HFMD is most contagious during the first week of the illness. People can sometimes be contagious for days or weeks after symptoms go away so it is important to always practice good hygiene including covering your cough and hand-washing. HFMD spreads through casual contact from person to person and includes coughing and sneezing. The virus appears in feces, saliva, mucus or fluid oozing from blisters of someone who has the infection. In daycare settings, it can spread by hand from providers who change multiple diapers. Contamination can also occur when a small child puts unwashed hands in his or her mouth. The illness can easily spread through classrooms, locker rooms, day care centers, college dorms and anywhere people spend a lot of time in close quarters.

HFMD is often confused with foot-and-mouth disease (also called hoof-and-mouth disease), which affects cattle, sheep, and swine. However, the two diseases are caused by different viruses and are not related. Humans do not get the animal disease, and animals do not get the human disease.

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