

Fifth Disease

Fifth disease is a viral infection which is caused by a human parvovirus (B19). Anyone can be infected, but the disease seems to occur more often in elementary school-age children. The virus is spread by exposure to airborne droplets from the nose and throat of infected people. In most cases the disease is diagnosed based on the appearance of typical symptoms. A specific blood test to confirm the diagnosis is available but is not necessary in healthy children. At this time there is no specific treatment.

One or two weeks after exposure, some children will experience a low grade fever and tiredness. By the third week, a red rash generally appears on the cheeks, giving a slapped face appearance. The rash may then extend to the body and tends to fade and reappear. Sometimes the rash is lacy in appearance and may be itchy. Some children may have vague signs of illness or no symptoms at all.

People with fifth disease are usually contagious during the week prior to the appearance of the rash. By the time the rash is evident, the person is probably beyond the contagious period, although people who are immunosuppressed or who have certain anemias may be contagious for a longer period.

It is thought that people who have been previously infected acquire long-term or lifelong immunity after one infection.

Complications:

- While there is no evidence that fifth disease is a significant cause of fetal defects, some studies have shown that infection of a pregnant woman may increase risk of miscarriage or spontaneous abortion. If you are exposed to someone with the disease or develop symptoms while pregnant, you should consult your doctor.
- In people with chronic red blood cell disorders, such as sickle-cell disease, infection may result in severe anemia. Infection has also been associated with arthritis in adults.

Prevention:

There are no preventative measures available to control fifth disease. During outbreaks in schools pregnant school employees and people with chronic red blood cell disorders should consult their physicians and the local or state health department for advice.