

Hand-Foot-and-Mouth Disease - Topic Overview

What is hand-foot-and-mouth disease?

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is a common childhood illness. It causes sores in the mouth and on the hands, feet, and sometimes the buttocks and legs. Mouth sores can be painful and may make it hard for your child to eat. The disease is not serious, and it usually goes away in a week or so.

It can occur at any time of year, but hand-foot-and-mouth disease is most common in the summer and fall.

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is **not** the same as other diseases that have similar names: **foot-and-mouth disease** (sometimes called hoof-and-mouth disease) or **mad cow disease**. These diseases almost always occur in animals.

What causes hand-foot-and-mouth disease?

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is caused by a virus called an **enterovirus**.

The virus spreads easily through coughing and sneezing. You can also get it by coming in contact with infected stool, such as when you change a diaper. Often the disease breaks out within a community. Children are most likely to spread the disease during the first week of the illness. But the virus stays in the stool and can sometimes spread to others for several months after the blisters and sores have healed.

It usually takes 3 to 6 days for a person to get symptoms of hand-foot-and-mouth disease after being exposed to the virus. This is called the incubation period.

What are the symptoms?

At first your child may feel tired, get a sore throat, or have a fever of around 101F to 103F. Then in a day or two, your child may get sores or blisters on the hands, feet, mouth, and sometimes the buttocks. In some cases a child will get a skin rash before the blisters appear. The blisters may break open and crust over. The sores and blisters usually go away in a week or so.

How is hand-foot-and-mouth disease diagnosed?

A doctor can tell if your child has hand-foot-and-mouth disease by the symptoms you describe and by looking at the sores and blisters.

How is it treated?

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease does not usually need treatment. Most cases go away in 7 to 10 days. You can use home care to help relieve your child's symptoms.

- Offer your child plenty of cool fluids. Your child may also have Popsicles and ice cream.
- Do not give your child acidic or spicy foods and drinks, such as salsa or orange juice. These foods can make mouth sores more painful.
- For pain and fever, give your child acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) or ibuprofen (such as Advil). Do **not** give your child aspirin. It has been linked to **Reye's syndrome**, a serious illness.

To help prevent the disease from spreading:

- Teach all family members to wash their hands often. It is especially important to wash your hands after you change the diaper of an infected child. This is because the virus may stay in the stool for several months after the blisters heal.
- Do not let your child share toys or give kisses while he or she is infected.
- If your child goes to day care or school, talk to the staff about when your child can return.
- Wear latex or rubber gloves when you apply any lotion, cream, or ointment to your child's blisters.