

children's health

Fifth Disease - Topic Overview

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What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is a very common childhood illness. Adults can get it too. It is sometimes called "slapped-cheek disease" because of the rash that some people get on the face. You spread the disease by coughing and sneezing.

As a rule, people can spread fifth disease only while they have flu-like symptoms and before they get a rash. Some people who have fifth disease, such as those who have certain blood disorders or weak immune systems, may be able to spread the disease for a longer time.

What causes fifth disease?

Fifth disease is caused by a virus called human parvovirus B19.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms are similar to the flu—runny nose, sore throat, headache—and may be so mild that you don't notice them. The rash comes several days later, first on the face and later over the rest of the body. The rash usually fades within 5 days.

Some people, usually adults, also get pain in their joints. This can last for several weeks or even months. Some people may also have a headache.

Not all people with fifth disease get a rash or feel sick.

How is fifth disease diagnosed?

Your doctor can diagnose fifth disease by doing a physical exam and asking questions about your medical history. Fifth disease is easier to diagnose if you have the rash.

How is it treated?

Most people can treat this illness at home with rest, fluids, and pain relievers. Fifth disease usually goes away after a few weeks.

For a few weeks, the rash may come back when you are out in the sun, get too warm, or are under stress. This does not mean the disease is worse.

By the time the rash appears, you can no longer spread the disease to anyone else. As soon as your child gets a rash, he or she may return to school or day care.

If you are pregnant or have a weak immune system or certain blood disorders, see your doctor. Fifth disease can cause problems for the fetus of a pregnant woman, but this is not common.

Frequently Asked Questions

Learning about fifth disease: What is fifth disease?
What are the symptoms?
Why is it called fifth disease?
Who is affected by it?

Being diagnosed: How is fifth disease diagnosed?

Getting treatment: How is fifth disease treated?
What is the home treatment for fifth disease?

Ongoing concerns: What complications can develop?