

Hand-Foot-and-Mouth Disease and Related Infections

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is a distinctive rash caused by a family of viruses called enteroviruses, which spread easily. The viruses can cause a blistering rash in the throat, hands, and feet. Your child's rash may not appear in all of these areas. The infection is rarely serious and usually clears up without treatment.

What is hand-foot-and-mouth disease?

Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is a common childhood infection causing a distinctive rash and other symptoms. It is unrelated to "foot-and-mouth disease" in farm animals.

The illness is usually mild, although the rash forming in the throat, hands, feet, and other areas may look alarming. Your child should recover in a week or so. Serious complications are rare.

What does it look like?


- Illness may begin with fever, loss of appetite, and sore throat. Younger children are more likely to have a high fever.
- A rash develops in and around the mouth. The rash starts out as small red spots, which may turn into blisters (vesicles) or shallow ulcers.
- A rash also develops on the skin, especially the hands, fingers, and feet and sometimes also on the buttocks and groin. This rash may appear as blisters or reddish or pink bumps or spots.
- Your child's rash may appear in all or only some of these areas and is usually not very itchy.
- Rash and other symptoms usually clear up in a week or so, with no further problems.

What causes hand-foot-and-mouth disease?

- Your child's rash and other symptoms are caused by a family of viruses called enteroviruses. Common subgroups include the coxsackieviruses and echoviruses. Some enteroviruses cause more severe disease than others.
- Enteroviruses can cause other types of disease, including a condition called herpangina that also causes ulcers in the mouth. Sores are more likely to appear at the back of the mouth.

- Enterovirus infection may also involve the lungs, eyes, heart, and nervous system, but these conditions are less common.
- Enteroviruses can spread easily to people your child comes into contact with at home or school. The infection is most contagious during the early stages.

What are some possible complications of hand-foot-and-mouth disease?

- Serious complications are uncommon. The infection usually clears up in a week or so, without further problems.
- Some enteroviruses cause more severe infection than others.
- On occasion, enterovirus infection can spread to the nervous system. These conditions, such as meningitis or encephalitis, are more serious and require medical evaluation, but children usually recover without problems.
- Call our office if your child develops any nervous system symptoms, such as headache, stiff neck, or back pain. 

What increases your child's risk of hand-foot-and-mouth disease?

- Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is most common in infants and children under 10 years old but can occur at any age.
- Enteroviruses are most likely to spread in the summer and fall.

Can hand-foot-and-mouth disease be prevented?

- Enteroviruses are very common and spread easily through oral secretions and cough. Wash your hands frequently to reduce the risk of spreading the disease to others. Be especially careful to clean up after changing your baby's diapers.

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

Usually, no specific treatment is needed for hand-foot-and-mouth disease. The infection clears up on its own, with or without treatment.

- Antibiotics are not needed. These medications kill only bacteria, not viruses.

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- Give your child pain relievers (acetaminophen or ibuprofen) for high fever or painful mouth sores, if needed. Placing an anesthetic gel (such as Anbesol) on the sores can temporarily reduce pain.
- Encourage your child to drink lots of liquids. Avoid orange juice or other acidic drinks, as these can irritate the throat.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's skin rash and other symptoms of hand-foot-and-mouth disease do not begin to clear up after 3 or 4 days.
- Your child develops any nervous system symptoms, such as headache, stiff neck, or back pain. 