

What to do if you have **Fifth Disease** in your school

The material in this brochure has been developed from a variety of sources including:

- BC Ministry of Health Planning
- Health Canada
- US Centers for Disease Control
- Vancouver Coastal Health Authority

While every attempt has been made to ensure the information presented is correct, persons concerned with Fifth Disease should discuss their situation with their attending physician.

What is Fifth Disease?

Also called "Slapped Cheek" Disease, it is a mild rash illness common to children after the age at which they begin to socialize. Typically, the ill child develops a bright red flush on the face and a lacy rash on the trunk and limbs a few days after having a low grade fever, malaise or a "cold." However, some children may not show any signs of illness or be aware of their infection.

How prevalent is Fifth Disease?

About 70 % of all cases occur in children between the ages 5 and 15 years old, whereas infants and adults are infected infrequently. The incidence of disease peaks in winter and early spring. About 50% of young adults have been previously infected and are immune. The number of people who are immune increases as we age. About 90% of the elderly are immune. The annual risk of infection for women of child bearing age is 1.5%

What causes Fifth Disease?

Parvovirus B 19. This virus infects only humans. It is not to be confused with the parvovirus that can infect animals. Humans cannot contract Fifth Disease from pets.

Is Fifth Disease contagious?

A person infected with Parvovirus B 19 is contagious only during the early part of the illness. When the characteristic "slapped cheek" is evident, the child is no longer contagious. This contagious period is different than for most other "rash" illnesses such as measles where the child is contagious when the rash appears.

How is Fifth Disease Spread?

Fifth Disease can be spread to others by direct contact with respiratory secretions present in coughs and sneezes of infected persons. Handling a 'wet' tissue or other object contaminated with respiratory secretions of an infected person and then touching your own mouth or eyes can be a source of infection.

How is Fifth diagnosed?

A physician can often diagnose Fifth Disease by seeing the typical facial and body rash. In cases in which it is important to confirm the diagnosis a blood test can be done for antibodies that will be present following a recent infection.

Does everyone who is infected with Parvovirus 819 get sick?

About 20 % of adults and children who are infected do not develop any symptoms. Most individuals will develop only mild symptoms. Some adults can develop joint pain and swelling in the hands, wrists and knees that usually resolve in a week or two but can last longer. Persons who have been previously infected have a life long immunity and cannot be infected again.

Who are the "at risk" individuals?

Anyone who has not previously contracted Fifth Disease is "at risk" If there is an outbreak of Fifth Disease in the school, in addition to advising parents and the school community, the following 2 groups of persons should be advised:

1. Any pregnant person. In some cases, the disease can be passed on to the developing baby. When this happens there is a very small chance (2-6%) of fetal death, with risk greatest in the first half of pregnancy. There is no increased risk of birth defects.
2. Any staff, student or school community person who is immune compromised or has chronic haemolytic anaemia such as sickle cell anaemia. These individuals can develop life threatening complications.

Can I tell if I have been infected?

A blood test for parvovirus B 19 may show that:

1. a person has immunity,
2. is not immune but has not been infected or,
3. has recently been infected

Pregnant school district staff members who have direct contact with students should ask their doctor about having a blood test for Fifth Disease very early in their pregnancy. Pregnant staff members should discuss with their doctor the management of their health and the baby during their pregnancy.

Should I stay away from school during my pregnancy?

Parvovirus B 19 has a world wide distribution and infections can occur throughout the year though most commonly during the winter and spring. People are most contagious before the onset of visible signs of Fifth Disease and consequent awareness of infection and are not contagious after symptoms are evident.

For pregnant staff and other "at risk" individuals the decision to avoid a school environment when there are reported cases of Fifth Disease should be an individual decision based on discussion with the attending physician.

Health organizations do not recommend the routine exclusion of "at risk" staff from school. Children with Fifth Disease are not excluded from school.

Because of the endemic nature of parvovirus B19, no community setting where there are persons that can carry the virus can be considered as being absent of the risk of infection. Infection can occur in homes, hospitals, supermarkets, theatres, childcare centers, and any place where people are present.

The risk of infection is highest where there is close and prolonged contact with people such as households where there are other children and in health care facilities.

The optimal management of a pregnancy or other health concern needs to be arrived at through discussion with the attending physician.

If there is a recommendation that a staff member should be removed from a classroom, alternate work arrangements that decrease exposure to students could be considered depending on their availability.

How can I best manage my exposure to Fifth Disease to protect my health?

The best control measures for dealing with Fifth Disease and other communicable diseases is personal hygiene, especially when dealing with respiratory secretions associated with coughing or sneezing.

The use of disposable tissues to capture respiratory secretions during coughs and sneezes should be a standard practice for students and staff. Tissues should be promptly discarded and not handled.

Extra attention should be given to cleaning classroom doorknobs, handles, and student desks and chairs when reports of Fifth Disease occur.

Hands should be carefully washed with soap and water periodically during the day especially when preparing or eating food or handling items previously handled by a student or other person. Waterless antiseptic agents are an excellent alternative when sinks are not available. Avoid touching your mouth or eyes with your hands at all times.