

What is Fifth Disease?

Fifth disease is generally a mild illness caused by a virus, parvovirus B19. It usually causes a “slapped-cheek” rash in infected children. Adults are more likely to have pain or swelling of the joints or flu-like symptoms.

What are the symptoms of an infection with Fifth Disease?

An ill child typically has a “slapped cheek” rash on the face and a lacy red rash on the trunk and limbs. Occasionally, the rash may itch. An ill child may have a low-grade fever, malaise, or a “cold” a few days before the rash breaks out. The child is usually not very ill and the rash resolves in 7 - 10 days. An adult who is not immune can be infected with parvovirus B19 and either have no symptoms or develop the typical rash of fifth disease, joint pain or swelling, or both. The joints most frequently affected are the hands, wrists, and knees. The joint pain and swelling usually resolve in a week or two, but they may last several months.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Usually within 4-14 days but may be as long as 20 days, after exposure.

How is this virus spread?

The virus is spread by contact with droplets produced by infected people coughing and sneezing. The most common time of year for spread is late winter and spring. Those at increased risk include healthcare workers, childcare workers, teachers, and mothers with infected children at home.

Who gets Fifth Disease?

More than 50% of adults have had prior exposure, and therefore do not get Fifth Disease again. It is most common in elementary-age children, but anyone can contract the disease.

For how long is a person infectious?

A person infected with parvovirus B19 is contagious during the early part of the illness, before the rash appears. Once the rash appears, the virus probably can no longer be spread to others.

What is the treatment for this illness?

Treatment of symptoms such as fever, pain, or itching is usually all that is needed for fifth disease. Adults with joint pain and swelling may need to rest, restrict their activities, and take medicines such as aspirin or ibuprofen to relieve symptoms.

Do infected people need to be excluded from school, work, or childcare?

Once the rash appears, the virus probably can no longer be spread to others. It is not necessary for children to be kept home from school or child care.

What can be done to help prevent the spread of these viruses?

Good hygiene, especially good handwashing is the best way to prevent spread.

What risk does this pose to pregnancy?

If a pregnant woman becomes infected, the fetus can also become infected. Fetal death can occur in a small percentage of cases and the risk is greater when infection occurs in the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. There is, however, no evidence to indicate that this virus causes birth defects. Occasional babies infected with the virus before birth can develop severe anemia and heart failure.

What should pregnant women do if they feel they have been exposed?

They should talk to their doctor.

What follow-up is needed in women with at-risk pregnancies?

If a woman becomes infected while pregnant, blood tests should be drawn. Several ultrasounds are recommended to detect more severe complications (usually performed weekly for 8 - 12 weeks). Occasionally more specialized tests are needed. In severe cases, the fetus may need a blood transfusion, which is then followed up by further ultrasounds.

Is infection with Parvovirus B19 an indication for pregnancy termination?

No, termination is neither necessary nor recommended. A successful outcome will occur in over 90% of cases.