

Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease

What is hand, foot, and mouth disease?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease is a disease caused by a virus. The disease causes sores in the mouth as well as blisters on the hands and feet. It mainly occurs in children age 6 months to 4 years.

Symptoms can include:

- small, painful ulcers in the mouth
- small water blisters or red spots located on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, and on the webs between the fingers and toes
- 5 or fewer blisters per hand or foot
- sometimes, small blisters or red spots on the buttocks
- a fever between 100°F and 102°F (37.8°C and 38.9°C).

What is the cause?

Hand, foot, and mouth disease is always caused by the Coxsackie A-16 virus. It has no relationship to hoof and mouth disease of cattle.

How long does it last?

The fever and discomfort are usually gone in 3 or 4 days. The mouth ulcers will heal in about 7 days, but the rash on the hands and feet can last 10 days. The only complication seen with any frequency is dehydration from children refusing to drink fluids.

How can I take care of my child?

- **Antacid solution for pain relief**

For very young children, put 1/2 teaspoon antacid solution in the front of the mouth four times a day after meals. Children over age 4 can use 1 teaspoon of an antacid solution as a mouthwash after meals.

- **Diet**

Offer a soft diet. Use a cup instead of a bottle to give fluids to very young children. Cold drinks, milkshakes, Popsicles, and sherbet are good choices. Avoid citrus, salty, or spicy foods.

- **Medication**

Give acetaminophen or ibuprofen for severe mouth pain or fever over 102°F (38.9°C).

- **Contagiousness**

Hand, foot, and mouth disease is quite contagious. Usually some of your child's playmates will develop it at about the same time. The incubation period after contact is 3 to 6 days. Because the spread of infection is extremely difficult to prevent and the condition is harmless, these children do not need to be isolated. They can return to day care or school when the fever returns to normal. While most children are contagious from 2 days before to 2 days after the rash, avoiding other children is unnecessary.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

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Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Your child has not urinated for more than 8 hours.
- Your child starts acting very sick.

Call during office hours if:

- The fever lasts more than 3 days.
- You have other concerns or questions.

Written by B.D. Schmitt, M.D., author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.