

Fifth Disease (Parvovirus B19 Infection)

What is Fifth Disease?

Fifth disease is a mild rash caused by a virus (germ) called parvovirus B19. The rash goes away in 7 to 10 days.

Once you have this infection, you are usually protected against getting it again in the future.

Is Fifth Disease Serious?

In most healthy people, fifth disease is a mild infection that goes away on its own. It can cause serious illness in people who have health issues that affect how well they can fight off infections.

People who have sickle cell anemia or other blood diseases (leukemia, cancer, organ transplants, HIV) may also get sicker than healthy people.

Who Usually Gets Fifth Disease?

Fifth disease is most often found in elementary school children. Adults can get sick if they have not had a parvovirus infection.

One in two adults has had a parvovirus infection and cannot get fifth disease.

How Does Fifth Disease Affect Pregnant Women?

Usually, there are no serious side effects for pregnant women or their babies.

There is no evidence that shows the disease causes birth defects or mental handicaps.

If you are pregnant and become infected at the beginning of your pregnancy, the danger to your baby is small. Your health care provider may want to watch your baby more closely.

In a few cases, fifth disease may cause an infected woman to lose her baby (miscarriage) or cause anemia (iron-poor blood) in an unborn baby.

Call your health care provider if you are pregnant and think you have been exposed to fifth disease.

How is Fifth Disease Spread?

Parvovirus B19 can be spread from person to person (contagious). People who are infected can spread it to other people before the rash appears when they have “just a cold.”

Once the rash appears, the infection cannot be spread. (This is different from other rash illnesses like chickenpox.)

The germ is found in secretions found in the nose (mucus) and mouth (spit or sputum).

Fifth disease is spread from person to person when someone comes in direct contact with these secretions. This can happen when sharing cups and utensils.

What are the Symptoms of Fifth Disease?

Most people become sick 4 to 14 days after being exposed to the virus. They have cold or flu-like symptoms.

Children get:

- low-grade fever
- a rash that looks like “slapped cheeks” on their face
- a lacy rash on the rest of their body.

The rash may or may not be itchy.

Adults get:

- low-grade fever
- rash
- joint pain or swelling.

The joint pain usually goes away in 1 to 2 weeks but it can last for several months.

How is Fifth Disease Found?

Your health care provider can tell if you or your child has fifth disease by looking at the face rash, doing a blood test, or both.

How is Fifth Disease Treated?

Fifth disease is caused by a virus. Antibiotics (medicine) will not help. You can treat a fever, pain or itching.

Adults who have joint pain and swelling may:

- need to rest
- slow down
- take over-the-counter medicine (such as ibuprofen or aspirin) to relieve symptoms.

If you have problems with your immune system, you may want to call your regular health care provider.

How can You Prevent the Spread of Fifth Disease?

There is no vaccine to prevent a parvovirus B19 infection. Wash your hands well with soap and water often. This is the best way to lower your chance of infection.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.