



## FIFTH DISEASE

### **What is Fifth disease?**

Fifth disease is a mild rash illness that appears usually 14 days after parvovirus B19 infection. It is more common in children than adults. This disease, also called erythema infectiosum, got its name because it was fifth in a list of historical classifications of common skin rash illnesses in children. Pet dogs and cats may be immunized against "parvovirus," but those are animal parvoviruses that do not infect humans.

### **What are the symptoms of fifth disease?**

The symptoms of fifth disease are usually mild and may include fever, runny nose, headache, and a red rash that appears on the cheeks, resembling slapped cheeks. It is more common in children than adults. After the appearance of the facial rash, a lacy rash may appear on the trunk, arms, and legs. Occasionally, the rash may itch. The infected individual may have a low-grade fever or cold symptoms a few days before the rash appears. The rash usually resolves in seven to 10 days. Exposure to sunlight or stress can cause the rash to reappear in individuals who have recovered.

An adult who is not immune to fifth disease can be infected and either have no symptoms, or develop the typical rash, joint pain (polyarthropathy syndrome) or swelling, or both. In adults, the rash is often hard to see. Joint pain is more common in adult women and less likely to be seen in children. The joint pain usually lasts one to three weeks and typically resolves without long-term complications.

Fifth disease is usually mild for children and adults who are otherwise healthy. But for some people, parvovirus B19 infection can cause serious health complications, such as chronic anemia that requires medical treatment. Individuals are at risk for serious complications from fifth disease if they have a weakened immune system caused by leukemia, cancer, organ transplants, or HIV infection. Pregnant women should consult with their health care providers about possible complications.

### **How is fifth disease spread?**

Fifth disease is spread from person to person through contact with respiratory secretions from an infected individual who coughs or sneezes. The virus also spreads when a person touches surfaces, such as drinking cups and eating utensils, that are contaminated with respiratory secretions and then touches the eyes or mouth. An individual is the most contagious when it seems like they have "just a fever and/or cold" and before getting the rash or joint pain and swelling. Once the rash appears, the individual is no longer contagious, so it is usually safe to return to work or for children to return to school or a childcare center.

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People with fifth disease who have weakened immune systems may be contagious for a longer amount of time. It takes between four and 20 days for symptoms to appear after exposure to the virus.

Parvovirus B19 can also spread through blood or blood products. A pregnant woman who is infected with parvovirus B19 can pass the virus to her baby. Exposed pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems should consult with their physicians for advice as soon as possible.

### **How is fifth disease treated?**

Fifth disease is usually mild and will go away on its own. Children and adults who are otherwise healthy usually recover completely. Treatment usually involves relieving symptoms such as fever, itching, joint pain, and swelling. People with complications from fifth disease should see their health care provider for medical treatment. Once individuals recover from fifth disease, they develop immunity that generally protects them from parvovirus B19 infection in the future.

### **What can I do to prevent getting fifth disease?**

There is no vaccine or medicine that can prevent parvovirus B19 infection. Individuals can reduce their chance of being infected or infecting others by:

- washing hands often, for at least 20 seconds, with soap and water
- covering the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- not touching the eyes, nose, or mouth
- avoiding close contact with sick people
- staying home when sick.

All health care providers and patients should follow strict infection control practices to prevent parvovirus B19 from spreading.

### **Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/parvovirusb19/fifth-disease.html> and <https://www.cdc.gov/parvovirusb19/pregnancy.html>

Delaware's "Managing Infectious Disease in Childcare Settings" manual: <https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/files/ChildCareManual2021.pdf>

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Page 2 of 2