
Hand foot and mouth disease (HFMD)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is hand foot and mouth disease?

Hand foot and mouth disease (HFMD) is a fairly common viral infection, which mainly affects infants and children. HFMD is caused by a group of viruses known as enteroviruses. It usually occurs in small outbreaks at crèches / day-care centres during the summer and autumn months.

2. Who can get hand foot and mouth disease?

Children under the age of 10 years are at greatest risk of infection. It is not common in adults, but people with weak immune systems may be prone to infection.

3. Where does hand foot and mouth disease occur in South Africa?

HFMD can be found anywhere in South Africa, but most outbreaks occur in institutions like crèches or daycare centres.

4. How is hand foot and mouth disease transmitted?

HFMD is spread from person to person by direct contact or by droplets from the mouth or nose of an infected person. The virus may also be spread through contaminated objects (e.g. toys, stationery) and faeces.

5. How does hand foot and mouth disease affect animals?

Hand foot and mouth disease does not occur in animals and should not be confused with foot and mouth disease (also called hoof-and-mouth disease), that affects animals (e.g. sheep, cattle).

6. What are the signs and symptoms of hand foot and mouth disease?

Symptoms usually start 3 to 7 days after infection and last between 7 to 10 days. Common signs and symptoms include fever, sore throat, tiredness, loss of appetite and small blisters on the inside of the mouth, sides of the tongue, palms of the hands and soles of the feet.

7. How is hand foot and mouth disease diagnosed?

HFMD is usually diagnosed on a clinical basis, but if symptoms are severe, samples from the throat or stool samples may be collected and sent to a laboratory to test for the virus.

8. How is hand foot and mouth disease treated?

There is no specific vaccine or treatment for HMFD. Individual symptoms such as fever and pain from sores can be treated with medication. Affected individuals are encouraged to rest and drink plenty of water. The infection is usually self-limiting and clears without medication after 7 to 10 days. A small minority of individuals with HMFD may need to be admitted to the hospital for treatment of complications. Infected individuals with severe disease or complications must go to the nearest healthcare facility.

9. How is hand foot and mouth disease prevented?

Educators and parents should encourage good hygiene such as regular hand-washing and not sharing eating utensils (e.g. cutlery, cups, toothbrushes). Regularly clean surfaces and other shared items such as toys and stationery. Children should avoid direct contact with persons who are ill. Affected children should not be excluded from school if they are well enough to attend, and there is no indication to close schools/cases when cases occur.

10. Can you get hand, foot and mouth disease more than once?

Yes, there are different viruses and viral strains within the enterovirus group, that are responsible for causing hand foot and mouth disease. If you have been infected by one type of virus, it doesn't protect you from catching another type later. There are also several other diseases that may present similarly to hand foot and mouth disease. If you are concerned about your symptoms, consult with your healthcare provider.

11. Where can I find out more information

NICD disease index: <https://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/hand-foot-and-mouth-disease/>

WHO: A guide to clinical management and public health response for hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD): <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/207490>

Health care workers: Contact the NICD Hotline on 0800 212 552