

# Hand Foot and Mouth Disease



***Hand foot and mouth disease is a very common childhood illness which spreads rapidly and is particularly common in the early Autumn. In this article we explain how to spot it, how to treat it and how to prevent it in the first place.***

## **What is hand, foot and mouth disease?**

Hand, foot and mouth disease is an infection caused by a type of virus called an enterovirus. It has absolutely nothing to do with foot and mouth disease that affects farm animals such as cows, pigs and sheep!

Hand, foot and mouth is common in children under 10 years of age however adolescents and adults can also be affected. It can be unpleasant and can be unsightly, but is usually mild and most people recover within a week or two, some people will experience no symptoms at all.

## **How does it spread?**

The bad news is that hand, foot and mouth is extremely contagious, and spreads easily through groups of children in schools and creches via sneezes and coughs. It can also be spread in faeces and by direct contact with the fluid that fills the infected blisters. This explains why it is incredibly common with younger children, given their tendency for snotty noses and lack of handwashing. You are infectious a few days before developing any symptoms which is why it spreads so quickly.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms appear 3 to 5 days after becoming infected, this is the incubation period of the virus. For the first few days, look out for your child feeling generally “unwell” with:

- A fever (temperature higher than 38°C)
- A sore throat

- Loss of appetite
- Generally feeling unwell

Obviously, the above symptoms are very similar to many other viral infections, but a few days later, a child with hand, foot and mouth will go on to develop:

- Blisters or ulcers in the mouth
- A rash (spots) or blisters on hands and feet

They might look like the below:



## **How do I treat hand, foot and mouth at home?**

Hand, foot and mouth can usually be treated at home, and symptoms tends to clear up within 7-10 days. Antibiotics won't help with hand, foot and mouth because it is caused by a virus, not a bacterial infection.

If your child gets a painful bout of hand, foot and mouth, there are lots of things you can do to ease their symptoms:

- Make sure they have plenty of drinks so they don't get dehydrated. They might not want to drink because of the sores so it's really important you encourage them to do so.
- Avoid acidic drinks like fruit juice that can aggravate the mouth sores.
- Anaesthetic mouthwashes or sprays can numb the pain from mouth ulcers

- Prepare soft, cold foods like yoghurt or smoothies and avoid hot or spicy foods.
- You can give the appropriate dose of paracetamol or ibuprofen according to your child's age - this will help ease symptoms like the sore throat and fever
- Use scratch mitts on small babies to prevent them bursting the blisters as this could lead to a bacterial infection.
- Speak to a pharmacist about treatments that might be suitable for your child, such as mouth ulcer gels and sprays to relieve pain.

## **Under what circumstances would I need to take my child to a doctor?**

- If symptoms do not improve after 7 days make an appointment to see your doctor, you should however let your doctor know that you suspect your child has hand, foot and mouth as they may arrange to see you when it is quiet
- If your child has a very high temperature which you are struggling to control
- If your child is dehydrated, you can tell this as they will not need to use the toilet as frequently as normal
- If you are concerned the blisters have become infected, for example if the skin around the blisters become red, or if pus starts oozing out of the blisters.

## **Is there any way I can prevent my child catching hand, foot and mouth?**

Hand, foot and mouth is really tricky to avoid, because it can be spread during the incubation period when there are no visible symptoms. Having said this, the most infectious time is when the blisters (which follow the spots) and mouth ulcers are present. If your child attends a child care setting it may be really hard to avoid, but there are a few things you can do to minimise the risk of catching hand, foot and mouth:

- Wash your hands and your child's hands frequently with soap and

water.

- Wash hand after handling nappies and after using the toilet
- Wash hands before preparing food
- Encourage your child to use a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and chuck them in the bin as soon as possible! If no tissues are to hand, limit virus droplets spreading by teaching them to sneeze into the crook of their arm
- Avoid sharing cups, cutlery and towels with anyone who is infected
- Try to discourage scratching or squeezing the blisters – the virus is contained in the fluid so you don't want it escaping
- Wash soiled bedding and clothing on a hot wash
- Keep your child off nursery or school if they are feeling unwell and try to avoid contact with other people whilst your child is symptomatic. As soon as they are feeling better, they can return to school, it is not necessary to wait until all the blisters have healed.

**Chances are your child will develop hand, foot and mouth at some point, so we hope this has helped you feel ready to deal with it. If you liked this article you may also like to read our article on how to help if your baby is choking.**

Donegal Safety Services Ltd provides this information for guidance and it is not in any way a substitute for medical advice. Donegal Safety Services Ltd is not responsible or liable for any diagnosis made, or actions taken based on this information.