

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Fifth Disease (Parovirus B19)



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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is fifth disease?

Fifth disease is a mild rash illness caused by parvovirus B19. It gets its name because it was fifth in a list of historical classifications of common skin rash illnesses in children. It is more common in children than adults. A person usually gets sick with fifth disease within 4 to 14 days after getting infected with parvovirus B19. It can cause different signs and symptoms, depending on a person's age and overall health.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms of fifth disease are usually mild and include:

- Fever
- Runny nose
- Headache
- Rash

After a few days a red rash, called "slapped cheek" rash, may appear on one's face. This rash is the most recognized feature of fifth disease. The rash may be itchy and usually goes away in 7 to 10 days. It is also possible for people to develop joint pain; this is more common in adults – especially women. The joint pain usually lasts for 1 to 3 weeks, but can last for a month or longer. It usually goes away without any long-term problems.

How do people get fifth disease?

Fifth disease spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You are most contagious (able to spread the disease to others) when it seems like you have "just a cold" and before you get the rash or joint pain and swelling. After you get the rash, you are most likely not contagious. However, those who have a weakened immune system can be contagious for a longer amount of time. The virus can also spread through blood or blood products. A pregnant woman who is infected with the virus can pass it to her baby. Once you recover from fifth disease, you develop immunity from parvovirus B19 infection in the future.

Is fifth disease serious?

Fifth disease is usually a mild illness that resolves on its own among children and adults who are otherwise healthy. However, parvovirus B19 infection may cause a serious illness in persons with sickle-cell disease or similar types of chronic anemia, a condition where an individual doesn't have enough healthy red blood cells. In such persons, parvovirus B19 can cause an acute, severe anemia (not enough healthy red blood cells).

What if I am pregnant and exposed to fifth disease?

Usually there is no serious complication for a pregnant woman or her baby because of exposure to a person with fifth disease. About 50% of women are already immune to parvovirus B19, and these women and their babies are protected from infection and illness. Even if a woman is susceptible and gets infected with parvovirus B19, she usually experiences only a mild illness. Likewise, her unborn baby usually does not have any problems attributable to parvovirus B19 infection.

How can you know for sure if you have fifth disease?

Your primary care provider can often diagnose fifth disease by seeing the typical rash during a physical examination. In cases in which it is important to confirm the diagnosis, a blood test may be done. A blood test can show if you are immune to the virus and you have no signs of a recent infection; are not immune and have not been infected; or if you have had a recent infection.

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, and joint pain and swelling. People who have complications from fifth disease should see their primary care provider for medical treatment. There is no vaccine or medicine that can prevent parvovirus B19 infection.

Can fifth disease be prevented?

There is no vaccine or medication that can prevent parvovirus B19 infection. You can reduce your chance of being infected with parvovirus B19 or infecting others by practicing good hygiene.

- Washing your hands often with soap and water
- Covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze
- Not touching your eyes, nose, or mouth
- Avoiding close contact with people who are sick
- Staying home when you are sick

After you get the rash, you are probably not contagious. So, it is usually safe for you to go back to work or for your child to return to school or a child care center.

Where can you get more information?

- Your primary care provider
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609)265-5548 or www.co.burlington.nj.us/health
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/parvovirusb19>
- The New Jersey Department of Health <http://www.nj.gov/health>