

Fifth Disease

Fifth disease is a viral infection caused by human parvovirus B19. In most instances, fifth disease is a relatively mild, self-limited rash illness of childhood. In rare instances this can lead to serious complications.

Anyone can become infected with the virus which causes fifth disease, but is most often recognized in elementary school-aged children. Symptoms of fifth disease occur 4-14 days after exposure. This starts out as a low grade fever and tiredness followed by a distinctive facial rash often referred to as “slapped cheeks”. The facial rash may then progress to a lace-like rash on the trunk, legs, and arms: this rash tends to fade and reappear with changes in temperature, sunlight, and emotional stress.

The virus is spread by exposure to airborne droplets from the nose and throat of infected individuals. Persons with fifth disease usually spread the virus during the week before the appearance of the rash. By the time the rash is evident, the individual is no longer spreading the virus.

Complications would include some pregnant women. Most women infected during pregnancy will not be affected, limited studies show that parvovirus B19 may infect the fetus and increase the risk of miscarriage within the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. In individuals with impaired immune function (leukemia or cancer) or chronic red blood cell disorders, infection may result in anemia. Persons who are exposed to parvovirus B19 and are either pregnant or have these other risk factors should consult with their physician.

There is no specific treatment or vaccine to prevent infection with this virus. Individuals with fifth disease should not be excluded from schools or daycare centers unless they have a fever. Good hand washing may be the most practical and effective method to reduce spread of the virus.