

Fifth Disease

Despite being called a "disease," fifth disease is actually just a viral illness that the majority of children will quickly recover from with no complications. Fifth disease is especially common in children between the ages of 5 and 15, and typically produces a distinctive red rash on the face that makes the child appear to have 'slapped cheeks'. The rash then spreads to the trunk, arms, and legs. As the centers of the blotches begin to clear, the rash takes on a lacy, net-like appearance.

Older children and adults sometimes complain that the rash itches, but most children with a rash caused by fifth disease do not look sick and no longer have fever. It may take 1 to 3 weeks for the rash to completely clear, and during that time it may seem to worsen until it finally fades away entirely. Sunlight, heat, and exercise may cause the rash to appear more clearly at times, but since it's not a bothersome rash, there's no reason to worry. Fifth Disease spreads easily from person to person in fluids from the nose, mouth, and throat of someone with the infection, but a child is usually not contagious once the rash appears. The incubation period (the time between infection and the onset of symptoms) for fifth disease ranges from 4 to 28 days.

Fifth Disease infection during pregnancy may cause problems for the unborn baby. Some fetuses may develop severe anemia if the mother is infected during the first half of the pregnancy. But serious problems occur in less than 5% of women who become infected during pregnancy.

Doctors can usually diagnose fifth disease by the distinctive rash on the face and body, so there is no need for blood work. Fifth disease is caused by a virus, and it cannot be treated with antibiotics used to treat bacterial infections. Although antiviral medicines do exist, there are currently none available that will treat fifth disease. In most cases, this is such a mild illness that no medicine is necessary. Usually, children with fifth disease feel fairly well and need little home treatment other than rest, and to lie back and watch the Red Sox win.