Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease

Hand, foot, and mouth disease is a common viral infection in children.

Hand, foot, and mouth disease can be very concerning to parents and caretakers. Most commonly, hand, foot, and mouth disease affects children younger than 5 years, but it can sometimes affect older children, adolescents, and adults. Most people are exposed to the virus that causes hand, foot, and mouth disease during their lives. The virus is commonly spread by coughing or personal contact with a sick person or their belongings. This makes schools, day care centers, and sports teams common environments for a child to pick up the virus.

Symptoms
Hand, foot, and mouth disease typically begins with feeling ill and having a low-grade fever. A child may also experience feeling tired and wanting to eat less. This progresses to flat, red spots that appear a few days later on the hands and the bottoms of the feet and sometimes elsewhere, which may turn into blisters. Painful spots appear in the mouth and throat that may also turn into blisters. The illness usually runs its course in 7 to 10 days. Hand, foot, and mouth disease is often seen during the summer months.

If your child experiences repeated high fevers, a stiff and painful neck, or a headache that will not go away, call your child's doctor.

Diagnosis and Treatment
No specific laboratory tests are used to diagnose hand, foot, and mouth disease. The diagnosis can be made simply on clinical appearance and symptoms.

Because hand, foot, and mouth disease is caused by a virus, the only treatments used are aimed at helping patients feel better. Appropriate medications may help relieve blister pain and lower fever. Pain from mouth sores may make a child reluctant to eat or drink, so it is important to encourage drinking of fluids. A sick child will need to be kept home from school and/or day care until he or she is no longer infectious.

Prevention
There is no vaccine for hand, foot, and mouth disease. The best prevention is avoiding contact with infected individuals and proper hand washing, hygiene, and cleaning of contaminated surfaces.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
• Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  www.cdc.gov/hand-foot-mouth/index.html
• American Academy of Pediatrics
  www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/infections/Pages/Hand-Foot-and-Mouth-Disease.aspx

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