

# Hand, foot and mouth disease: What every parent needs to know about this common illness

October 12 2023, by Miriam Jones Bradley, RN

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Hand, foot and mouth disease is an infectious disease that's highly contagious. Common in children, it spreads quickly at day care centers and schools.

This guide will tell you what you need to know about hand, [foot](#) and [mouth disease](#), its symptoms, causes, stages and treatment.

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

Hand, foot and mouth disease is an illness caused by a very contagious virus that can be passed along before a person is aware he or she is infected.

While hand, foot and mouth disease in adults is rare, it can happen, according to the [Cleveland Clinic](#). Hand, foot and mouth disease in children under 10 is far more common.

## **Is hand, foot and mouth disease contagious?**

Be aware that hand, foot and mouth disease is easily transmitted from person to person. But just how is hand, foot and mouth disease spread? It can be transmitted in several ways, according to the [Cleveland Clinic](#):

- Droplets from an infected person coughing or sneezing.
- Direct contact with blisters.
- Shared items, like utensils, towels, clothing, surfaces and toys.
- Through feces (stool, or poop). Be sure to wash your hands right away if you're changing diapers, pull-ups or you otherwise come into contact with an infected person's stool.

What causes hand, foot and mouth disease?

Two families of viruses cause hand, foot and mouth disease, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#).

"Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is caused by human enteroviruses and coxsackieviruses." wrote a team headed by Dr. Aaron Saguil, an associate dean at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, in [American Family Physician](#):

- Most people get this virus through the mouth.
- It is common among day care centers and preschools as small children need frequent diaper changes and tend to put their fingers in their mouths.
- The virus can stay on surfaces such as doorknobs and toys for a long time.
- People are most contagious before they realize they are infected.

Hand, foot and mouth disease symptoms

According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), hand, foot and mouth disease symptoms include:

- Fever
- Eating or drinking less
- Sore throat
- Feeling unwell
- Rash on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, and even buttocks, arms and legs
- Blisters on bottom of feet or hands
- Sores in mouth and throat

Stages of hand, foot and mouth disease:

The time from [initial infection](#) to first symptoms ([incubation period](#)) is three to six days, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#). The illness typically has [three stages](#):

- Stage one is much like the flu with mild fever, [sore throat](#), runny nose and poor appetite, lasting one to two days. This is when you are most contagious.
- Stage two, beginning on the third day, is when mouth sores show up.
- Stage three is when you may develop a rash on your hands and feet, as well as other parts of your body. This rash should disappear within 10 days.

## Hand, foot and mouth disease treatment

While there is no specific medical treatment for hand, foot and mouth disease, according to the [CDC](#), most people get well on their own in seven to 10 days. However, some medications and supportive therapies can provide relief.

## Medication for hand, foot and mouth disease

These medications for hand, foot and mouth disease can help with comfort and fever. Important: Do not give children aspirin.

- acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Ibuprofen

## Hand, foot and mouth disease supportive therapy

Here are some [supportive therapy](#) suggestions.

- Stay hydrated. With kids, this can be challenging because of sores in their mouths.
- Ice cream or frozen pops may help numb the pain and provide needed hydration.
- Avoid acidic drinks such as [orange juice](#) or carbonated drinks.
- If child is able to rinse their mouths without swallowing, urge them to swish salt water frequently.
- Provide soft foods.

If hand, foot and mouth disease symptoms become severe, you feel your child may be dehydrated, or if you or your child has a weak immune system, call your medical provider. In addition, if the fever doesn't go away in three days, or the symptoms last more than 10 days, contact your physician.

## Living with hand, foot and mouth disease

While [hand](#), foot and mouth disease is short-lived, [living with it](#) can be challenging. Because of this, prevention should be at the top of mind. Here are some ideas to help you avoid infection and passing the virus along, if you are.

- Wash hands for at least 20 seconds after changing a diaper or using the bathroom. Also, wash hands before and after eating.
- Teach children to wash their hands for 20 seconds.
- Avoid putting your hands near your mouth or nose.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces often, including doorknobs and light switches.
- Wash your [children's](#) clothing and bedding.
- Stay home and away from others, especially at the beginning of

symptoms.

**More information:** U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:  
[How to Treat Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease](#)

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