Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease

What is hand-foot-and-mouth disease?
Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a common contagious viral illness that commonly affects infants and children in countries with temperate climates but can cause illness in adults. It causes sores in the mouth and on the hands, feet, and sometimes the buttocks and legs. Mouth sores can be painful and may make it hard to eat. The disease is not serious, and it usually goes away in a week or so. HFMD occurs most often in summer and early autumn.

What causes hand-foot-and-mouth disease?
Hand-foot-and-mouth disease is caused by an enterovirus. The virus spreads easily through coughing and sneezing. You can also get it by coming in contact with infected stool, such as when you change a diaper. Often the disease breaks out within a community. Children are most likely to spread the disease during the first week of the illness. But the virus stays in the stool and can sometimes spread to others for several months after the blisters and sores have healed. It usually takes 3 to 6 days for a person to get symptoms of hand-foot-and-mouth disease after being exposed to the virus.

What Are the Symptoms of HFMD?
Symptoms usually begin with a fever, poor appetite, malaise (feeling vaguely unwell), and often a sore throat. A couple of days after the fever starts, painful sores can develop in the mouth. A skin rash with flat or raised red spots can also develop, usually on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet and sometimes on the buttocks. This rash may blister, but it will not itch. Some people with HFMD may only have a rash; others may only have mouth sores. Other people with HFMD may show no symptoms at all. At first, infected persons may feel tired, get a sore throat or have a fever of around 101°F (38°C) to 103°F (39°C). Then in a day or two, there may be the development may get sores or blisters on the hands, feet, mouth, and sometimes the buttocks. In some cases skin rashes before the blisters appear. The blisters may break open and crust over. The sores and blisters usually go away in a week or so.
**Is HFMD Serious?**
HFMD is usually not serious. The illness is typically mild, and nearly all patients recover in 7–10 days without medical treatment. Complications are uncommon. Rarely, an infected person can develop viral meningitis (characterized by fever, headache, stiff neck, or back pain). Other rare complications can include polio-like paralysis or encephalitis (brain inflammation), which can be fatal.

**Is HFMD Contagious?**
Yes, HFMD is moderately contagious. The disease is spread by direct contact with nose and throat discharges, saliva, fluid from blisters, or the stool of infected persons. People with HFMD are most contagious during the first week of their illness, but they can spread the virus that causes HFMD weeks after symptoms have gone away. It is also important to remember that people who get HFMD and show no symptoms of the disease can still spread the viruses that cause it.

**Who Is at Risk for HFMD?**
HFMD mostly infects children younger than 10 years of age, but older children and adults can also get the disease. Individuals who get HFMD develop immunity to the specific virus that caused their infection. However, because HFMD can be caused by several different viruses, people can get the disease again if they are infected by one of the other HFMD-causing viruses.
Can HFMD Be Treated?
There is no specific treatment for HFMD. Fever and pain can be managed with over-the-counter fever reducers/pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. In addition, individuals with HFMD should drink enough fluids to prevent dehydration (loss of body fluids). Most cases go away in 7 to 10 days.

- Offer your child plenty of cool fluids. Your child may also have Popsicles and ice cream.
- Do not give your child acidic or spicy foods and drinks, such as salsa or orange juice. These foods can make mouth sores more painful.
- For pain and fever is treated with acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

How is hand-foot-and-mouth disease diagnosed?
A doctor can tell if your child has hand-foot-and-mouth disease by the symptoms you describe and by looking at the sores and blisters.

Can HFMD Be Prevented?
There is no vaccine to protect against HFMD. However, the risk of getting the disease can be reduced by

- Frequently washing hands, especially after diaper changes;
- Thoroughly cleaning objects and surfaces (toys, doorknobs, etc.) that may be contaminated with a virus that causes HFMD; and
- Avoiding close contact (like kissing and hugging) with people who are infected.

To help prevent the disease from spreading:
- Teach all family members to wash their hands often. It is especially important to wash your hands after you change the diaper of an infected child. This is because the virus may stay in the stool for several months after the blisters heal.
- Do not let your child share toys or give kisses while he or she is infected.
- If the child goes to day care or school, talk to the staff about when your child can return.
- Wear latex or rubber gloves when you apply any lotion, cream, or ointment to your child’s blisters.

Is HFMD the Same as Foot-and-Mouth Disease?
No. HFMD is often confused with foot-and-mouth (also called hoof-and-mouth) disease, which affects cattle, sheep, and swine.

References:
http://www.cdc.gov/Features/HandFootMouthDisease/  Accessed 10/28/11

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