

Slapped Cheek Disease

Slapped cheek disease is normally a mild, short illness. However, the rash may appear to be quite dramatic. No treatment is usually needed. However, it can cause harm to an unborn baby so women who are pregnant and come into contact with people who have this illness need to seek medical advice.

What is slapped cheek disease?

Slapped cheek disease is sometimes called fifth disease or erythema infectiosum. It is an infection caused by the parvovirus B19 virus. It most commonly occurs in children aged 3-15 years but anyone can be affected. It can be passed on (it is infectious). The infectious period is for 4-20 days before the rash appears. By the time the rash develops, it is usually no longer infectious.

In the UK, April and May are the peak months for this condition. However, it may occur at any time.

Approximately 50-60% of people in the UK have had this infection in the past, usually without realising it. You only have slapped cheek disease once in a lifetime. This is because you make antibodies during the infection which protect you from future infections with this same germ (virus).

Note: Pet dogs or cats can be immunised against parvovirus. However, these are animal parvoviruses which are different from parvovirus B19.

What are the symptoms of slapped cheek disease?

Rash

Typically, the rash looks like a bright red scald on one or both cheeks. It looks as if the cheek(s) have been slapped. Sometimes there is just a blotchy redness on the face. The rash is painless.

Sometimes a more widespread faint rash appears on the body, arms and legs. Occasionally, the rash on the face and body keeps fading and returning several times for up to several weeks. However, it is more common for the rash to come and go completely within a few days.

Other symptoms

Although the rash can look quite dramatic, the illness itself is usually mild. You will usually not feel too ill. You may have a headache, sore throat, runny nose or mild temperature (fever) that last for a few days and occur around 7-10 days before the rash appears. Occasionally, mild pain and stiffness develop in one or more joints for a few days. This is more common in adults than in children.

You may have no symptoms

Around one in four people who become infected with this germ (virus) do not develop any symptoms at all. Some people just have a fever and feel generally unwell, without any rashes.

Are there any tests for slapped cheek disease?

This condition is usually diagnosed by the appearance of the classical rash on your cheeks.

A blood test is sometimes performed. This will show if you have the disease and can also show if you have had this disease in the past. If you have had the disease in the past (even if you had it without developing any symptoms) then you will be immune to it.

Are there any complications from slapped cheek disease?

Usually not. Rarely, the aching joint symptoms last for some time after the other symptoms have gone.

The only times the illness may become more serious are:

- In children with some types of hereditary anaemia such as sickle cell disease, beta-thalassaemia and hereditary spherocytosis. This germ (virus) can cause these types of anaemia to become suddenly much worse.
- In people with a weakened immune system. If you have leukaemia or cancer, have had an organ transplant

or have HIV infection then you may develop a more serious illness with this infection.

What should pregnant women do?

Most pregnant women are immune to this germ (virus), or will not be seriously affected if they become infected by it. However, like some other viruses, the virus that causes slapped cheek disease can sometimes harm an unborn child. Miscarriage is more common in women who are infected with this virus before 20 weeks of pregnancy.

If you develop a rash during your pregnancy or come into contact with a person with a rash then you should seek medical advice. Your doctor will usually arrange for you to have a blood test to see if you have had slapped cheek disease in the past. If this is the case then you can be reassured and will not usually need other tests or treatment.

However, if the test does not show that you have had slapped cheek disease in the past, you may need to have other blood tests and also other tests - for example, a scan of your unborn baby.

What is the treatment for slapped cheek disease?

You do not usually need any treatment. If you have a headache, high temperature (fever) or aches and pains then painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen will help.

Those people who develop complications (which is very rare) may require other treatment.

Can slapped cheek disease be prevented?

There is no vaccine or treatment that prevents this infection. Frequent hand washing reduces the risk of this infection being transmitted to other people.

You can still go to school (or work) if you have this infection, as you are only able to pass it on (are infectious) before you develop the rash. People infected with parvovirus B19 are considered non-infectious one day after the rash begins.

Further reading & references

- Parvovirus B19: guidance, data and analysis; Public Health England
- Rash in pregnancy; Public Health England
- UK Standards for Microbiology Investigations: Investigation of Pregnant Women Exposed to Non-Vesicular Rash; Public Health England, 2015

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Last Checked: 28/09/2016

Document ID: 4331 | Version: 40

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