

The Children's Doctor



My four-year-old son James has caught hand, foot and mouth disease for the last two summers. What I can do to protect him this year?

Hand, foot and mouth is a common childhood illness which has nothing to do with foot and mouth disease which kills sheep. It is usually caused by a coxsackie virus but there are a number of viruses which can cause similar symptoms. It is more common over the summer months. It is most common in children under the age of 6 years but can affect older children and adults.

Typically, the child will have blisters on the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, around the mouth and in the nappy area which can last for up to 10 days. The child may also have mouth ulcers and a fever for two or three days. As with any viral illness, it is important to encourage fluids and rest. No medicine is required, other than paracetamol for the fever. The child will recover within 7-10 days. If you are concerned, you should see your GP to confirm the diagnosis.

Hand foot and mouth disease is highly contagious. The virus is spread via direct contact with infected saliva, airborne droplets, contaminated faeces or fluid from the blisters. Most daycare centres will insist children stay at home until all the blisters have dried. However, the virus may remain in the stools for several weeks. The best way to prevent infection is to maintain strict hygiene standards both at day care and at home.

Coxsackie virus is named after the town of Coxsackie in New York USA where it was first identified. Other than that, it is much too technical to explain the virus any further. For some reason, parents always like to know the name of the virus!! I'm not sure why...but it seems to give them some confidence ???

I don't know why it is more common in summer other than to assume that the virus does not live long in cooler temperatures so is not so readily spread. We see outbreaks in Sydney as soon as spring arrives but can also see cases if the winter is particularly warm. Again, too technical I think.