

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.

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 4-12 years, but anyone can be affected. It is infectious (can be passed on). The infectious period is for 4-20 days before the rash appears. By the time the rash develops, it is usually no longer infectious.

You normally have slapped cheek disease only once in a lifetime. This is because you make antibodies during the infection which protect you from future infections with this same virus.

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 four 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 or mild temperature (fever) for a few days before the rash appears. Occasionally, mild pain and stiffness develops in one or more joints for a few days.

You may have no symptoms

Many people become infected with this virus without developing any symptoms at all.

What is the treatment?

You do not usually need any treatment. If you have a headache, temperature, or aches and pains then paracetamol or ibuprofen will help.

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 virus can cause these types of anaemia to become suddenly much worse.

- In pregnant women. Most pregnant women are immune to this 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. Therefore, if you are pregnant, keep away from people who have slapped cheek disease.