

What is Parvovirus infection?

Parvovirus infection (Fifth disease) is a mild rash illness that mainly affects children. It causes a 'slapped-cheek' rash on the face and a lacy red rash on the trunk and limbs. Occasionally, the rash may be itchy. A low-grade fever, malaise, or a 'cold' may also occur a few days before the rash. The child is usually not very ill and the rash disappears in 7–10 days.

What causes parvovirus infection?

It is caused by infection with human parvovirus B19. The animal parvoviruses do not infect humans.

Can adults get parvovirus infection?

Yes. Adults either experience no symptoms or may develop either the rash, or joint pain and swelling (often the hands, wrists and knees), or both. The symptoms usually resolve in 1–2 weeks, although joint pain may last for several months. About 50% of adults have developed an immunity to the virus from a previous infection.

Is parvovirus contagious?

Yes, during the early part of the illness before the rash appears.

How is it spread?

Probably by direct contact with the saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus of infected persons before the rash appears, when they appear to have a cold (e.g. through sharing cups or utensils).

Is it serious?

This usually mild illness normally resolves without treatment in healthy children and adults. Infection in a pregnant woman may increase the risk of miscarriage or cause anaemia in the foetus. Among people with chronic red blood cell disorders, infection may result in severe anaemia.

How soon after infection does a person become ill?

Usually 4–14 days, and up to 20 days.

How long does it last?

About 1–3 weeks.

Does everyone infected with parvovirus become ill?

No, about 20% of adults and children with parvovirus will not develop symptoms. Others who have the virus may develop a non-specific illness that is not characteristic of parvovirus.

How is parvovirus infection diagnosed?

The typical rash is usually sufficient for diagnosis, but a blood test is available when confirmation is important.

How is it treated?

Treatment of the symptoms is usually all that is required. Adults with joint pain and swelling might also need to rest or restrict their activities. In the rare cases where a person with a blood disorder develops severe anemia from the infection, hospitalisation may be required; those with immune problems also may need special medical care. Pregnant women may require follow up.

Can parvovirus infection be prevented?

There is no vaccine or medicine that prevents infection. Regular handwashing is recommended. Staying away from school or work is unlikely to be effective as the contagious period has passed before the rash appears. After exposure to infection those who are pregnant, anaemic, or have an immune deficiency should consult a doctor.