

---

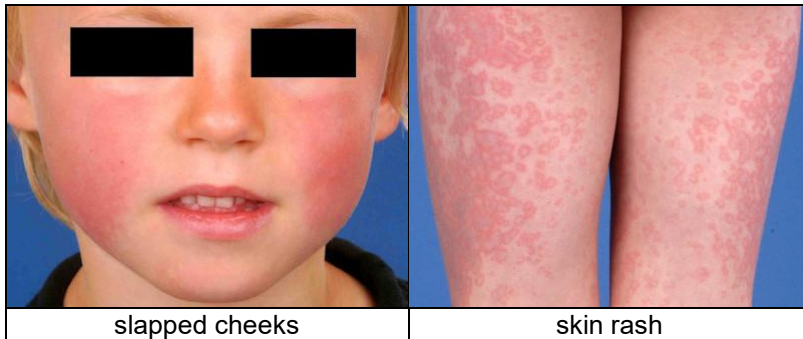
## FIFTH DISEASE (ERYTHEMA INFECTIOSUM)

---

### WHAT IS FIFTH DISEASE?

**Fifth disease** is a childhood illness in which spots appear on the cheeks and later on the rest of the body. Fifth disease is also called **erythema infectiosum** (meaning red and contagious). It is caused by a **virus** (Parvo virus B19). Fifth disease is contagious to anyone who has not had it before.

There are other types of **rash diseases** that mainly affect children, such as measles, rubella, and scarlet fever. What is striking about fifth disease is that children are not very ill, and that it starts with red cheeks.



### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF FIFTH DISEASE?

Children are not greatly affected by fifth disease. In the week before the red cheeks appear, there are sometimes **mild flu-like symptoms**: fever, fatigue, muscle pain, headache, and itching. Then the **red cheeks** (resembling slapped cheeks) appear. Later, a red spotty **rash** may spread over the entire body. The area around the mouth remains unaffected. The spots may be ring-shaped (annular). After about a week, everything disappears. A small proportion of children (5-10%) experience short-term **joint pain** in their hands, feet, knees, and wrists.

Adults can also get fifth disease. Adults are more likely to experience joint pain, especially women. Often, the spots are absent and only joint pain is present. The joint pain also lasts longer, sometimes for months. It can resemble a mild form of rheumatism.

If pregnant women contract the infection during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy, it can be dangerous for the unborn child. There is a risk of miscarriage. This rarely happens in the Netherlands, because most women (60-70%) have already had fifth disease as children and are immune (they cannot contract the virus again).

### WHO CAN GET FIFTH DISEASE?

Fifth disease is a contagious viral infection. It mainly occurs in children at primary schools and daycare centers, and among their family members. Children in the 5-15 age group are particularly susceptible. Occasionally, there is an epidemic (many cases at the same time), especially in winter and spring. Teachers and childcare workers can also contract it if they did not have the disease in their childhood. After infection with the virus, the body produces antibodies, after which the person is protected against the virus for life (immune).

### HOW DO YOU BECOME INFECTED WITH FIFTH DISEASE?

In infected individuals, the virus is present in the throat. Coughing, sneezing, and talking release tiny droplets containing the virus into the air. People can inhale these droplets and become infected. Someone with fifth disease can infect other people from one week before they become ill until the spots appear. Once the spots appear, the disease is no longer contagious.

Fifth disease is not very contagious; you have to be in close contact with someone who has it for a long time to catch it. That is why it is mainly caught within the family, or at a daycare center, preschool, or school. Not everyone who has been around someone with fifth disease will become ill. The time between becoming infected and becoming ill is usually 1 to 3 weeks.

## **HOW IS FIFTH DISEASE TREATED?**

There is no treatment for it, nor is one necessary. It goes away on its own.

## **SHOULD AN INFECTED CHILD BE KEPT AT HOME?**

No, because by the time the spots appear, the virus has already disappeared and is no longer contagious. If the child feels well, they can go to daycare, preschool, or school as usual. However, you should inform the manager or teacher. They can then inform other parents. Parents can then watch for symptoms of fifth disease in their child.

An adult who has fifth disease and feels well can go to work as usual.

## **WHAT IF I AM PREGNANT?**

Infection with fifth disease in the first half of pregnancy can be dangerous for the child. There is a risk of miscarriage. For most women, the pregnancy proceeds normally and there are no consequences for the baby. A pregnant woman can only become infected if she has never been exposed to the virus and therefore has no antibodies. A blood test can determine whether antibodies are present.

Are you pregnant and does someone in your family has fifth disease? Then consult your doctor. You can still take your children to and from daycare, as the risk of infection when taking them to and from daycare is low. The situation is different for a pregnant teacher or childcare worker who has no antibodies and is less than 20 weeks pregnant: if there is an epidemic of fifth disease at school or childcare center, it is better for her to stay at home. Three weeks after the last child has had fifth disease, or if the pregnancy is more than 20 weeks, the workplace is safe again.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT FIFTH DISEASE?**

There is no vaccination against fifth disease. There are also no medications that can prevent the disease. However, there are tips to prevent the spread of the disease, such as using a paper tissue when coughing and sneezing, covering your nose and mouth with your hand, or coughing and sneezing into the crook of your elbow, and washing your hands regularly with soap and water.

