

Patient information: Erythema infectiosum (fifth disease) (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is erythema infectiosum? — Erythema infectiosum is an infection that causes a rash, fever, and other symptoms. It is caused by a virus called “human parvovirus.” Another name for erythema infectiosum is “fifth disease.”

Fifth disease is common in children. Adults can also get it. If a pregnant woman gets fifth disease, it can be dangerous for her unborn baby.

What are the symptoms of fifth disease? — Many people with fifth disease have no symptoms or only mild symptoms. Most people feel better in a few weeks.

When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Itching
- Cough
- Upset stomach – With diarrhea, nausea, and vomiting
- Sneezing
- Conjunctivitis (also called “pinkeye”) – This is an eye infection or irritation.
- Muscle aches
- Joint aches – These are more common in adults who get fifth disease. Children do not get them as often.

The first symptoms last 2 to 5 days. After that, symptoms can include:

- Rash on the face – Often called a “slapped cheek” rash, this rash makes a child’s cheek look bright red, as if someone just slapped it ([picture 1](#)).
- Rash on the chest, back, arms, and legs – This usually shows up after the face rash. The rash makes a pattern that looks like lace ([picture 2](#)).
- Joint pain – Usually in hands, wrists, knees, and feet.

Children often feel better by the time they get a rash. Sometimes, the rash comes back after it goes away. Sunlight, temperature changes, exercise, or stress can make it come back.

People with certain medical conditions can get sicker with fifth disease than other people. They include:

- People who have problems with the body’s infection-fighting system, called the “immune system.”
- People who have certain conditions that affect red blood cells, such as sickle cell disease or thalassemia.

Is there a test for fifth disease? — A doctor or nurse can usually tell if someone has it by learning about the symptoms and doing an exam. If there is any doubt, he or she can order a blood test for the virus that causes fifth disease.

If you are pregnant and have symptoms of fifth disease, or are around someone who has it, tell your doctor or nurse right away. He or she can order a blood test to see if you have the infection. Your doctor or nurse can also do tests to see if your unborn baby has the infection.

Should my child see a doctor or nurse? — If your child has an immune or blood disorder and has symptoms of fifth disease, see the doctor or nurse.

If you or your child has symptoms for more than a month, see your doctor or nurse.

How is fifth disease treated? — Most people with fifth disease get better without treatment. If your child has itching or joint pain, the doctor or nurse might recommend medicine to help your child feel better. For example, the doctor might recommend [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) to treat pain.

So far, doctors do not have a good medicine to treat the virus that causes fifth disease. Antibiotics DO NOT WORK on fifth disease.

Can fifth disease be prevented? — You can lower your chances of getting fifth disease by:

- Washing your hands often with soap and water, or using an alcohol hand rub. Teach your children to do the same.
- Not sharing food and drinks with other people.

What if I am pregnant? — If you are pregnant and were around someone with the virus that causes fifth disease, ask your doctor or nurse about your risk of infection.

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GRAPHICS

Slapped cheek rash

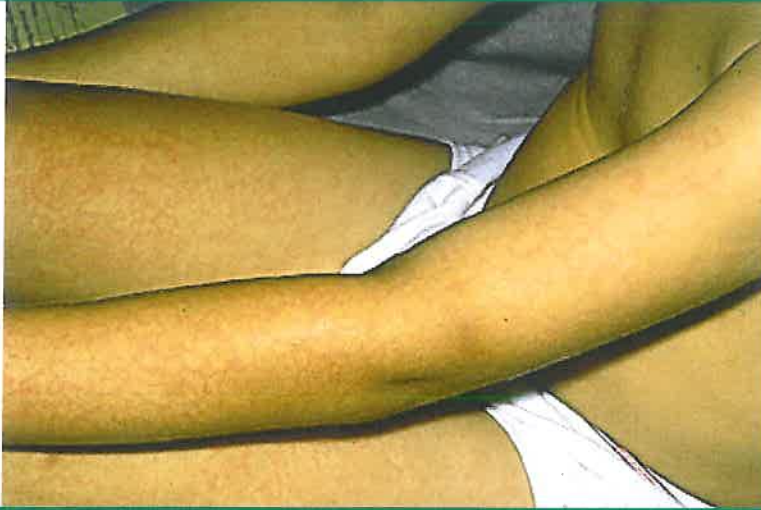


Children with erythema infectiosum (fifth disease) often have a rash on the face that looks like they were slapped.

Courtesy of Moise L Levy, MD.

Graphic 83120 Version 1.0

Rash in erythema infectiosum



Children with erythema infectiosum can get a rash on the chest, back, arms, and legs.

Courtesy of Lee T Nesbitt, Jr. The Skin and Infection: A Color Atlas and Text, Sanders CV, Nesbitt LT Jr (Eds), Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, 1995.

<http://www.lww.com>

Graphic 83122 Version 2.0