Keeping an eye on hand, Foot and mouth disease | Bangkok Post: news

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Expert warns that while the affliction is common, it is not to be underestimated

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The news about a three-year-old girl who died from hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) which made the front pages a few weeks ago has stirred concern among parents and teachers alike.
HFMD is nothing new, but each time the news about an outbreak emerges, schools and parents are sent into a worried frenzy. One of the biggest HFMD outbreaks in Thai history was the one in 2010, which saw dozens of kindergartens and schools shut down temporarily in order to disinfect the facilities.

Infection control expert Junya Jarayopas explained that HFMD outbreaks occur all the time, but commonly spreads in the rainy season and in winter.

"Last year, 44,350 cases of the disease were reported to the Ministry of Public Health, with three reported deaths. Even when there is no news about the
outbreak of HFMD, parents and schools still need to be aware that it is possible for children to catch this disease," said Junya.

She added that the chance of HFMD patients suffering from complications is not high, but it should not be ruled out either. Possible complications include meningitis (acute inflammation of the tissues that surround the brain and spinal cord), encephalitis (brain inflammation caused by a virus), paralysis, myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle) and even death.

She commented that HFMD is scary not because of the viruses themselves, but the misunderstanding surrounding the disease. The news has served to raise awareness about the disease, but not much has been done to promote correct understanding.

"First of all, sometimes the parents don't even recognise the symptoms, and assume that it's just a cold. There are many diseases with similar symptoms, which are fever and rashes. This is what makes it dangerous - the fact that sometimes it is not easily detectable, and even misdiagnosed. Parents need to be informed about all the possible signs to look out for, and when they believe it could be HFMD, the child needs to see the doctor as soon as possible," said Junya.

While the most apparent symptoms are the blister-like rashes on the hands and feet, and blisters on the tongue, gum and inside of the cheeks, some children do not show those signs at all. Blisters can also develop on the buttocks, confusing the parents whether this is a sign of HFMD or just an ordinary rash.

HFMD is a viral infection caused by a group of enteroviruses, most commonly coxsackievirus A16 (CAV 16) and enterovirus 71 (EV 71), or occasionally other strains. HFMD infections caused by coxsackieviruses tend to be more severe than those caused by enteroviruses in terms of visible symptoms, but enteroviruses do more damage to the internal system of the body, according to Junya. The girl who passed away earlier this year was also diagnosed with EV 71.

"What this means is if your child has just a few blisters, it should not be ignored. It's not only the visible symptoms that count," she warned.

Naparat, whose son was diagnosed with HFMD a few months ago, said that although she had read about HFMD, when her three-year-old had it, she did not even notice.

"He did not have any fever, and I saw just one or two red bumps on his hand in the morning. In the afternoon, the headmaster of his school called, saying he looked like he had HFMD. At the time, I still did not quite believe it, because he had no fever, and there weren't that many spots. It was when I took him to see the doctor and she confirmed the disease that I learned HFMD does not necessarily mean widespread rashes and fever. Luckily, he recovered on his own without medication after a few days," said the mother.

Duenden, whose daughter first had HFMD when she was three, said she was convinced that it would never happen again.

"I thought, as with other viruses, once the body is affected, your body becomes immune to it for life," she recalled. "I was really surprised when a year later, she had HFMD again. I even argued with the doctor that it was impossible for a child to have HFMD twice, but she then explained it could be caused by different strains."
Another thing that surprised Duenden was the fact that she had always kept a bottle of hand sanitising gel in her purse, and cleaned her child's hands every time she touched something unclean-looking. Her little girl ended up having had HFMD three times by the time she turned five.

"That's the problem — most people don't know enough about these HFMD-causing viruses," Junya remarked. "An alcohol-based hand sanitiser works by breaking down the cell membranes. Viruses have no cell wall, so they can still be very much alive no matter how much hand gel you use." There is no treatment or vaccine for HFMD, but basic hygiene goes a long way. Keeping the hands clean is an important habit to instill in children.

"It is not only good for preventing HFMD, but also a good way to minimise the chance of other diseases. However, there needs to be a realistic expectation for cleanliness. Keeping your child in a sterile environment, telling him to wash his hands every hour, sanitising everything he touches or being overly cautious about germs might do the opposite. Our body needs to get familiar with germs in order to know how to cope with them or get rid of them. It's a natural process," Junya said.

**Ten things you might not know**

1. Those infected with HFMD virus do not always have rashes on their hands and feet. Sometimes the lesions are hidden in the throat and cannot be seen.
2. Fever is also not a guaranteed sign. Some HFMD patients have no fever.
3. These viruses can withstand many cleaning agents, even alcohol-based hand rubs. Alcohol-based hand sanitisers do not provide effective prevention against HFMD, and are not a substitute for hand washing.
4. Adults can also get HFMD, and sometimes they are not aware of it. Therefore, adults who have no symptoms or do not recognise the mild symptoms may be carriers of the disease, passing it on to children.
5. The viruses that cause HFMD are not spread by airborne transmission. Air purifiers cannot prevent it.
6. There is no vaccine to prevent HFMD, and no medication to treat it. The body's immune system needs to fight the virus off by itself.
7. It is possible to be infected with HFMD more than once in a lifetime. There are many strains of the two viruses, and even if a person develops immunity to an individual strain after an illness, they can still be susceptible to other unrelated strains.
8. When disinfecting surfaces to prevent the outbreak of HFMD, water and soap is the best method. Harsh cleaning agents are not only possibly not effective in killing stubborn HFMD viruses, but they might also leave harmful residues.
9. Antibacterial soaps don't kill viruses — they kill bacteria. There is no need to switch from regular soaps to antibacterial ones in an attempt to prevent HFMD.
10 Transmission of the disease isn't as straightforward as having someone with HFMD sneezing on you. The viruses that cause HFMD can survive in the environment for days. This means they can linger on doorknobs, sliders, chairs and other surfaces, and you can pick up the viruses without knowing.

Understanding the illness

Common symptoms

- High fever for two to four days with muscle pain (flu-like symptoms).
- Blisters on the tongue, gum and inside of the cheeks. Blisters will then develop on the palms and soles of the feet as well as buttocks.
- Blisters will break and become ulcers.

HFMD treatment

- There is currently no specific medicine for the disease.
- Treatment is provided on the basis of symptoms such as fever or pain.

Recommendations for patients

- Get plenty of sleep in order for the body's immune system to fight off the virus.
- Drink plenty of water. Get sufficient vitamin C to boost the immune system.
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