

617 children infected last week

Ministry tracking situation closely as number crosses epidemic level

■ BY LEE HUI CHIEH

WHEN school re-opens next week, parents should keep a close eye on their children and avoid sending them to school if they have the tell-tale symptoms of hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD).

The number of children who came down with the common childhood affliction crossed the epidemic level last week, and looks likely to go up, going by past trends.

Last week, 617 children were diagnosed with the usually mild disease which causes fever and rashes on the hands, feet and buttocks, higher than the official epidemic level of 565 cases a week.

Ten children had to be hospitalised because their illness left them unable to eat properly.

But it is too early to declare that an HFMD outbreak is under way, as numbers fluctuate from week to week, and could come down this week, a spokesman for the Ministry of Health (MOH) said.

In fact, fewer children are expected to catch the disease from other children during this week, as it is the one-week school holiday period.

She added: "A sustained rise above the epidemic level for two or more consecutive weeks is more significant, especially if

there is a rising trend. MOH will continue to monitor the situation closely."

Still, it is likely that numbers will continue to grow, as traditionally, more children are hit by HFMD between August and October each year.

The total number affected during this peak period tends to be lower than the other traditional peak period of March to May. As many as 1,466 children came down with the disease in a week in April at the height of the first peak this year.

The disease is of great concern to the authorities this year because the current predominant virus is EV71 that causes a deadly form of the disease.

This year, EV71 has caused four children to develop encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain lining.

One of them, a three-year-old boy, died last month – the first HFMD death here since seven children were killed, mostly by the same virus, in a severe outbreak in 2000 and 2001.

Mr James Hou, 36, a manager of an engineering company, is taking no chances after his four-year-old son came down with HFMD last week.

He took his son to KK Women's and Children's Hospital when the boy complained of a headache two days after being diagnosed with HFMD.

He said: "If it's just fever, it's not unusual. But when other symptoms come, it's better to have a detailed check."

He said that the family was particular about hygiene and hand-washing at home, so his son had probably caught the disease outside.

About the disease

HAND, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) is normally a mild childhood disease affecting mainly children up to five years old.

Symptoms include fever, blister-like rashes on the hands, feet and buttocks, mouth ulcers, vomiting and diarrhoea.

It is spread through contact with bodily fluids such as nasal discharge and saliva. This is why it spreads quickly among children who share toys, which many put in their mouths. About 70 viruses cause HFMD, with the enterovirus 71 considered the most lethal.

Practising good personal hygiene could cut transmission of the virus.

The Health Ministry urges parents to consult a doctor early if their child is suspected to be down with HFMD.

So even though his son has recovered, he has kept both the boy and his five-year-old daughter away from their childcare centre because other children there came down with HFMD recently.

He has also banned them from going to playgrounds for the time being.

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