

HFMD cases near epidemic level



Four-year-old Ang Ding Chao having his mouth checked at Ascension Kindercare. Children aged 10 and below are especially susceptible to hand, foot and mouth disease, which is spread through body fluids and can be passed on through the sharing of toys. ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

653 hit last week, just 12 short of critical level; numbers likely to rise in coming traditional peak

By JESSICA JAGANATHAN

CHILD CARE centres and kindergartens are stepping up the cleaning of classrooms as the number of children coming down with hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) continues to climb.

Last week, 653 people came down with the normally mild childhood disease that usually causes fever and rashes.

That is just 12 short of the Health Ministry's official "epidemic level".

Seven children had to be hospitalised last week; this is not out of the ordinary and in most cases, they recover within a week.

HFMD is a common childhood ailment that causes ulcers, rashes and blisters on the hands, feet and buttocks.

Affecting mainly children aged 10 years and younger, it is spread through bodily fluids, which is why it can be passed quickly among young children who share toys that they may have put in their mouths.

For now, no childcare centres have been ordered to close, as the cases are spread out rather than clustered in any one particular area.

However, the number of cases is likely to rise between this month and next, one of two traditional peaks for HFMD, with the other being August to October.

There were 4,926 cases in the first 13 weeks of the year, compared to 4,423 for the same period last year.

A Ministry of Health (MOH) spokesman told The Straits Times that the predominant strain now is still the enterovirus 71 (EV71) that can potentially develop into a deadly form of the disease.

Last year, the EV71 caused four children to develop encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain lining, and a three-year-old boy died as a result. In a severe outbreak between 2000 and 2001, seven children were killed by the virus.

In Singapore, there have been no re-

ported cases of EV71-associated encephalitis so far this year or of any deaths from the disease, said the ministry.

But the virus is active in the region. In China, 33 children have died from HFMD this year in the crowded central Henan and eastern Shandong provinces.

Meanwhile, local childcare centres and kindergartens The Straits Times spoke to are taking precautions.

The Church of the Holy Trinity Kindergarten in Tampines is spending an extra \$400 to clean its premises every quarter.

Principal Shirley Tan said the kindergarten is sanitised and thoroughly cleaned before every session to avoid a repeat of last year's incident, when the centre had to shut for 10 days. She added that children have been drilled into a routine of heading straight to the toilet to wash up and clean their hands with a sanitiser before classes and meals.

"Prevention is always better than cure, so we have stepped up checks," she said.

At the larger chains, like My First School and the PAP Community Foundation (PCF), the usual health screening and cleaning measures are in place.

Children with fever, spots and ulcers are sent home and their parents are told to take them to a doctor.

Ms Ruth Low, chief executive of the PCF, which runs over 250 kindergartens and 30 childcare centres, said there are currently 32 children down with HFMD spread over all her centres, although eight are clustered in the Woodlands area. Two weeks ago, it was fewer than 20.

"But I don't see anything alarming yet that triggers me to have sleepless nights," she said, adding that she will continue to monitor the situation and inform parents whenever necessary.

Parents like Ms Devi Meyyappan, 30, said she might keep her three-year-old son at home if the nursery has an outbreak.

"I just don't want to take any chances", she said.

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