



Nativity Church Kindergarten in Hougang Ave 8 has been forced to close for 10 days, after a growing number of children fell ill with hand, foot and mouth disease.

**ST PHOTO:
DESMOND FOO**

HFMD above epidemic level for two months

More children also coming down with virulent strain

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HAND, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) continues to rage across Singapore, with the number of cases above epidemic levels for almost two months, forcing the temporary shutdown of one kindergarten and a watch on two childcare centres.

Last week alone, more than 900 children nationwide were infected with this usually mild childhood disease, bringing the year's total to 18,007. This is 67 per cent higher than the number of children infected by this time last year.

The number of HFMD cases has been at or above the warning level for the last six consecutive months; in the last seven weeks, it has shot past the epidemic level of 679 cases a week.

Of greater concern is the grow-

ing number of children coming down with the more dangerous enterovirus 71 (EV71), which can cause brain damage or even kill.

Last month, the HFMD in 12 per cent of patients was caused by EV71.

However, of the 233 children hospitalised for HFMD since the start of the year, none has developed serious complications.

But the ministries of Health; Education; and Community Development, Youth and Sports have nonetheless been moved to act.

Since kindergartens or childcare centres vary widely in enrolment, the law requires a 10-day shutdown if at least 16 children or 23 per cent of the enrolment - whichever is the lower figure - fall ill over a 24-day period. The closure will allow for the place to be thoroughly disinfected and for the chain of infection to be broken.

This was what happened to Nativity Church Kindergarten in Hougang Ave 8.

And if any kindergarten or childcare centre has at least 10 cases or 13 per cent of its enrolment - again, whichever figure is

lower - falling ill within a 16-day period, the name of the pre-school will go up on the Health Ministry's website so parents are aware of the school's status.

Two childcare centres - Star Learners@Sembawang and Pat's Schoolhouse at Arena Country Club in Jurong - have made the list.

Mrs Patricia Koh, the founder-director of Pat's Schoolhouse, said the last HFMD case turned up in her school on Aug 3, and the place has been clean since then.

A joint statement from the three ministries said the rise of EV71 cases here mirrors the situation in China, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan.

The ministries noted that 65 per cent of the HFMD cases this year have been among children five years and younger.

The illness is characterised by fever, blisters in the mouth and rashes on the hands and feet, giving it its name.

Children down with it are often listless and do not eat well. Many young patients were hospitalised because they had poor appetites, noted the Health Ministry.

The virus is spread through contact with bodily fluids, so proper hygiene is key to containing its spread.

The disease is caused by a group of about 80 viruses, some more deadly than others. In 2008, four children infected with EV71 developed encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain lining. One of them died. In the worst HFMD outbreak here in 2000, four children died.

The Health Ministry urges parents to keep their infected children at home until their blisters have dried up. They should not be in contact with other children while they are ill.

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