

Another kindergarten closes as HFMD spread worsens

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THE hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) situation in Singapore is worsening, and another kindergarten was ordered to close yesterday as the number of cases continues to soar.

Last week, 982 children were diagnosed with the disease, compared with just 158 during the same period last year.

Anything above 679 cases a week is classified as epidemic levels by the Ministry of Health (MOH).

So far, 19,000 children have been infected this year – almost twice the norm seen over the past five years. More than 240 children have been warded for treatment.

The total number of childcare centres and kindergartens ordered to close since the end of last week has hit four.

Three other childcare centres, which have active clusters of more than 10 cases over 16 days, have had their names posted on MOH's website. This is to alert parents who might want to keep their children away.

While the cases so far have not resulted in any deaths or serious sickness, the increase in cases is a cause for concern because of the large number of children falling sick.

More worryingly, the deadly enterovirus 71 (EV71) strain of the virus is circulating here. Last week, 11 per cent of children sampled had this infection.

This strain came into play only recently. In May, when the number of cases started rising



PCF Kampong Chai Chee is the fourth kindergarten to close since the end of last week, as HFMD numbers here reach epidemic levels. ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

towards the epidemic level, MOH ruled out EV71 as the cause.

HFMD is usually a mild childhood disease caused by any of the following viruses: polio, coxsackie, echo and entero.

Even with the milder viruses, children can get quite sick with fever, loss of appetite, fatigue and sore throat. Red blisters form on the tongue, gums and cheeks, as well as on palms, soles and buttocks.

However, if the infection is caused by EV71, things take a more serious, and potentially deadly, turn.

A child's nervous system could be affected, or encephalitis – the swelling of the brain – could occur, and death could result.

Several young children have died here following such infections, and others have been left brain damaged as a result.

Childcare centres and schools that are forced to close stay shut for 10 days so sick children can stay away during the infectious

phase of the virus, which occurs during the first week after they fall ill.

Closed schools are also given a thorough cleaning, as HFMD spreads through direct contact with the virus, which is found in bodily fluids like saliva.

This is why it is easily spread among toddlers, who tend to put toys and other things into their mouths.

MOH stressed the importance of good hygiene to break the transmission of infections.

It urged parents to get their children to wash their hands before eating or after going to the toilet, to cover their mouths with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and not to share utensils.

They should also consult a doctor if they suspect the child might have the disease.

Since 2000, doctors have to inform the ministry of every case of HFMD.

Children also need to be declared free of infection before they are allowed back in class.