

Random HFMD checks at childcare centres

Number of cases not dropping despite end of seasonal peak period

BY MELISSA PANG

CASES of hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) should be tapering off at this time of the year, but they continue to plateau at high levels.

Because of this, the Ministry of Health has started conducting random spot checks on preschool and childcare centres to ensure that staff and children are

practising good hygiene habits.

Dr Steven Ooi, deputy director of the ministry's Surveillance and Response Branch, Communicable Diseases Division, said yesterday that there are typically two HFMD peak periods in a year.

The first is from March to May, and the second from August to October. The second peak is usually not as high as the first because most children would have developed immunity towards a strain of the virus by then.

Dr Ooi, an epidemiologist, said the number of HFMD cases should be going down now, but the figure continues to hover around 679 a week. Last week, 710 cases were reported. The ministry consid-

ers it an epidemic if the number of cases exceeds 679 a week.

Last year, a total of 17,278 cases of HFMD were reported. So far this year, over 26,000 cases have surfaced. No one has died.

The checks on the centres will help keep the disease in check.

"The emphasis is on reinforcing and encouraging the schools to continue good practices such as hand washing," said Dr Ooi. He added that the ministry is also concerned about the enterovirus 71 (EV71) strain, which is known to cause fatal complications.

EV71 can affect a child's nervous system and cause encephalitis, resulting in



Spot checks on preschools and childcare centres will ensure that staff and children are practising good hygiene habits. ST FILE PHOTO

death. An average of 17 per cent of all HFMD cases this year involved the EV71 strain.

HFMD is a common childhood disease endemic in Singapore. It is spread via bodily fluids such as saliva and nasal discharge.

Symptoms include red blisters in the

mouth and on the soles of the feet and palms, as well as on the buttocks. An infected child may also suffer fever, a sore throat, and loss of appetite. There is currently no vaccine for HFMD.

The ministry currently publishes the names of childcare centres and kindergartens with more than 10 HFMD cases, or 13 per cent of its enrolment falling ill, within a 16-day period. Schools with a higher risk will be closed for 10 days.

Since Aug 13, 22 childcare centres and two kindergartens have been placed on the list. Seven childcare centres and three kindergartens were closed temporarily.

A spokesman for childcare group Cherie Hearts Group International applauded the ministry's move to conduct spot checks.

But Mrs Helen Chua, principal of Glory Kindergarten in Pei Wah Avenue, said there is only so much schools and the authorities can do to prevent HFMD.

"Parents should take children who are sick to the doctor and keep them at home. Even with the best measures, all it takes is one kid to spread the infection," she said.

melpang@sph.com.sg