

MCYS officers visiting 800 childcare centres as number of cases crosses warning level

By JOAN CHEW

HYGIENE checks will be carried out at all 800 childcare centres in Singapore to stem cases of hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD).

The viral infection is now on the rise because of a seasonal peak.

Checks began early last month, but the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) is stepping up its efforts by deploying more officers to visit childcare centres islandwide.

According to the Ministry of Health (MOH), weekly cases of HFMD have crossed the warning level of 500 in the last four weeks. There were 572 cases recorded last week.

The epidemic threshold is reached when 679 cases are recorded in a week, according to MOH.

HFMD can affect both adults and children, causing fever, rashes on the hands and feet and painful ulcers in the mouth. Childcare centres are hot spots for the infection, which is spread by direct contact with an infected person.

MCYS officers have visited 250 centres so far, most of which were up to standard on hygiene practices, the ministry said yesterday in response to queries.

During the spot checks, MCYS officers inspect premises like toilets and children's play areas. They also observe the health screening measures undertaken by the childcare staff. These include temperature-taking for the children and supervision of hand-washing.

Said an MCYS spokesman: "The visits serve to bring to the centres' attention some of the critical areas that require further improvement."

They also remind the centres to maintain clean and safe environments, said the spokesman.

MCYS said that no childcare centre has been ordered to close this year because of HFMD.

Checks stepped up to stem HFMD outbreak



Many childcare centres in Singapore routinely conduct health checks, such as temperature screenings, to prevent outbreaks of HFMD. Infections occur throughout the year but they usually peak from March to May and in October and November. ST FILE PHOTO

During an outbreak in April 2008, 59 childcare centres and kindergartens closed – either following MOH's orders or voluntarily.

MOH said the current crop of cases is not caused by the virulent EV71 strain, and are part of a seasonal peak. The EV71 strain killed seven children here in the last major outbreak in 2000 and 2001.

Though HFMD can occur throughout the year, there are generally two peaks – from March to May, and in October and November.

MOH has recorded 6,487 HFMD cases in Singapore so far this year, up from the 6,070 recorded in the same period last year.

MCYS attributed the rise in the number of cases being diagnosed to "heightened social responsibility and parental vigilance".

Besides stepping up checks of childcare centres, it has also sent about 52,000 copies of circulars to parents, asking them to be vigilant and to refrain from sending sick children to school.

Four of the 14 childcare centres run by The Little Skool-House International have been checked by MCYS so far.

Ms Shirley Wong, its senior operations manager, said that all its centres will be adopting the recommendation of disinfecting toys up to three times a week, even for centres that do not have HFMD cases. Currently, the centres clean the toys on a weekly basis.

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What to note

■ **Prevention measures:** Proper hygiene practices such as handwashing should be practised. Children should be kept away from crowded public places if they show signs of infection. Parents are advised to monitor their children for symptoms.

■ **Look out for:** Fever, sore throat, ulcers in the throat, mouth and tongue, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea and rash on palms of hands, soles of feet, or buttocks.