

HFMD cases on the rise again

737 children caught the disease last week; EV71 strain adds to concern

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CASES of hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) are again on the rise, after falling for several weeks, and there is now the added worry of the deadly enterovirus 71 (EV71) strain.

Last week, 737 children were diagnosed with the viral-borne disease, up from 691 the previous week. Once the weekly number of infections crosses the 679 figure, it denotes an epidemic.

The number of cases peaked at 1,261 a week last month.

The various ministries involved have been actively monitoring the situation and have taken steps to try to curb the spread of this disease.

Last week, two childcare centres with ongoing cases were forced to close for 10 days, to try to break the chain of trans-

mission among its children.

Cherie Hearts Little Genius at Pasir Panjang was closed last Wednesday, and My First Skool at Jurong Point shopping centre was closed last Friday.

The names of three other centres were posted on the Health Ministry's website as having prolonged transmission of the disease among its children. This ensures that parents know the risks which their children face.

Of greater concern is the recent increase in cases involving the EV71 strain. It has caused the illnesses of 13 per cent of the children infected with HFMD this month – up from 11 per cent last month.

However, a Health Ministry spokesman said that while some children have been admitted to hospital, there have been no severe cases so far.

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It causes red blisters to form in the mouth and on the soles of feet and palms, as well as on the buttocks. It often comes with fever, a sore throat and a loss of appetite.

While the disease, caused by any one of a family of viruses including polio and coxsackie, tends to be mild, this cannot be said when it involves the EV71 strain.

This strain, in severe cases, could affect the child's nervous system, cause encephalitis – which is the swelling of the brain lining – and result in death.

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