

Hand, foot and mouth disease rages

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Number of cases topped 1,000 last week; four schools on watch list

■ BY AMRESH GUNASINGHAM

HAND, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) has continued spreading across the island, taking the number of cases past the 1,000 mark last week for the first time this year.

Last week, 1,261 children were diagnosed with the disease, up from 982 the week before; the number of cases has been at or above the epidemic threshold of 679 cases a week for the last eight weeks.

Cumulatively this year, 20,249 children have come down with this usually mild childhood infection, almost twice the annual norm seen in the last five years.

Of the number, 259 or 1.3 per cent of the children have needed hospitalisation. The Ministry of Health (MOH) said the majority of the cases have been mild; children who caught the infection were most-

ly those with poor nutritional habits, which lowered their resistance.

Earlier this week, MOH put another childcare centre - My First Skool in Toa Payoh - on its online "watch list".

Kindergartens or childcare centres with at least 10 children, or 13 per cent of the enrolment - whichever figure is lower - falling ill within a 16-day period are put on this list on the ministry's website. The list keeps parents aware of the schools' status.

Three other schools are now on it.

Schools with more serious outbreaks - those with at least 16 children, or 23 per cent of the enrolment, whichever is lower, falling ill over a 24-day period - are shut down for 10 days to break the chain of infection. The enforced closure also gives the school time to be thoroughly disinfected.

Of the four pre-school centres shut down since the outbreak began, the Nativity Church Kindergarten in Hougang has reopened.

Two kindergartens, the PCF Kampong Chai Chee Kindergarten in Bedok and Glory Kindergarten in Pei Wah Avenue, are expected to reopen tomorrow; Star Learners@Sembawang childcare centre will open by next week.



My First Skool, which is on the Ministry Of Health's watch list, is trying to contain the hand, foot and mouth disease infection by cleaning its premises three times a day. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

So far, no child here has developed brain damage or died from HFMD caused by the enterovirus 71 (EV71) strain of the virus, but MOH is concerned that it is circulating here. It estimates that 11 per cent of children sampled last week had EV71, about the same as the week before.

Outbreaks of this virus in previous years have killed several children, or left them brain damaged.

HFMD is more usually characterised by fever, loss of appetite, fatigue and sore throat. Infected children also get red blisters in their mouths and on their palms, soles and buttocks.

Meanwhile, My First Skool, where the first case was recorded on June 19, is taking steps to contain the infection.

Its premises are cleaned three times a day, and letters are sent regularly to parents to keep them abreast of the situation, said general manager Adeline Tan. The school has also prepared lessons for its pupils to follow at home, in case the school is forced to close, she added.

An MOH spokesman said it would continue tracking the situation and advised parents to take their children to see a doctor early if they suspect HFMD, as well as keep them away from public places.

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