

# Parents, beware - HFMD cases up

Numbers soar past  
'epidemic  
warning' level

By JUDITH TAN

HAND, foot and mouth disease (HFMD), the usually mild childhood illness which brings fever and rashes, has resurfaced with a vengeance.

The number of cases zipped past the "epidemic warning" level of 500 cases a week in the first two weeks of this month.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) noted on its website that 517 children came down with it in the first week of the month and 559 in the week following.

The number tailed off slightly to 496 at the end of last week, bringing the tally in the first 11 weeks of this year to 4,269 cases. This was 15 per cent more than the 3,705 for the corresponding 11 weeks last year.

An MOH spokesman, allaying parents' anxieties, said its survey of hospitals and family doctors indicated that the strain of virus circulating was not enterovirus 71 (EV71), which is known to trigger potentially serious complications.

MOH will nonetheless track the situation.

HFMD, which usually hits infants and children, causes fever and blister-like eruptions in the mouth and/or a skin rash.

It is spread by direct contact with an infected person through saliva, nasal discharge, faeces and the fluid from the rash.

No childcare centre has so far been closed on account of HFMD, said the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

But MOH has advised parents



MOH has advised parents to monitor their children for symptoms and seek medical attention early if they show signs of being unwell. SHIN MIN FILE PHOTO

to monitor their preschool children for symptoms and to seek medical attention early if their children are unwell.

The MOH spokesman added: "They should not send their sick children to school and childcare, and should avoid taking them to public or crowded places.

"Parents are also advised to maintain high standards of personal and environmental hygiene at home to minimise the spread."

Lucas Tan, aged 23 months, caught the disease from his playmates at a childcare centre at the beginning of this month.

His mother Jesslyn Tan, a nurse with the National University Hospital, told The Straits Times that the centre informed parents as soon as the first case appeared.

Lucas' rashes and blisters surfaced only three days after his

fever dissipated.

She said: "We didn't think it was HFMD at first, until the rashes appeared. He was kept at home for a week until he was well. What was most worrying was he refused to eat and lived only on fruit juices and Ribena."

Associate Professor Chong Chia Yin, who heads the Infectious Diseases Service at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital, said 438 HFMD cases had been treated there as of the middle of the month.

Forty children, or about one in 10, were hospitalised, but none of them developed complications.

As of Sunday, the other hospital which admits children, the National University Hospital, had handled 15 cases in its paediatric emergency department this month.

judith@sph.com.sg