

HFMD kills 18 kids in China

42,000 people
infected this year,
before peak season

BEIJING: Health officials said yesterday that the hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) had struck almost 42,000 people and killed 18 children so far this year – even before the normal peak period.

The outbreak seems more widespread than in recent years, with the number of people infected about twice that during the same period last year.

Dr Li Xingwang of Beijing's Ditan Hospital said the peak season is usually May to July.

He noted that the toll will prob-

ably be above average this year, given the early spike in cases.

He attributed the increase to “dramatic temperature fluctuations” that had helped spread the virus, particularly in rural areas where sanitation is poor and health care is substandard.

The disease – common in China and usually triggered by the deadliest strain, enterovirus 71 – took an extra high toll last year, infecting nearly 500,000 people and killing 126, according to Health Ministry reports. In contrast, 2007 saw about 80,000 cases, with 17 deaths reported.

Last year, Anhui province was the worst hit, with 26 deaths.

This year, a fifth of the cases were in Shandong and Henan provinces, with five and seven deaths reported respectively.

Health Ministry spokesman Deng Haihua, speaking yesterday at a press briefing, said almost 94 per cent of the patients this year were under five years of age.

He said that prevention and awareness efforts were being stepped up but the viruses were likely to continue spreading. He added that the peak is expected to come between May and June.

Ms Vivian Tam, a spokesman for the World Health Organisation in China, said the apparent jump in cases could be attributed in part to greater awareness.

She said the numbers might be higher not necessarily because more people had been infected, but because more reports had been recorded.

The disease typically strikes infants and children and can be deadly on occasion. Most cases are mild, with children recovering fast after suffering little more than a fever and a rash.

Symptoms include fever, mouth sores and rashes with blisters. The virus is spread through direct contact with nose or throat discharges, saliva, fluid from blisters or the stool of infected persons. The usual incubation period – the time between infection and the onset of symptoms – is three to seven days.

The virus is not related to hoof and mouth disease, which infects cattle, sheep and pigs.

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