

What is Parvovirus B19 (slapped cheek)?

Parvovirus B19 is a virus that commonly infects children. The virus is transmitted primarily by respiratory droplets (coughing and sneezing). School teachers, nursery workers and mothers of young children are particularly likely to be exposed to this virus.

What illnesses does Parvovirus B19 cause?

Parvovirus B19 commonly causes a mild rash-like illness, usually in children. Children with fifth disease (also known as erythema infectiosum) typically have a '**slapped cheek**' rash on their face. They may also have a lacy, red rash on their torso and limbs.

In adults, Parvovirus B19 infection may cause painful joints in addition to the skin rash. These symptoms are more common in adult women than men. They usually last for 2 – 4 weeks but may persist for several months.

Important: Many people with Parvovirus infections show no symptoms at all. Therefore, the only way to know if a person has Parvovirus B19 infection is to test for it.

Parvovirus B19 and Pregnancy

Usually exposure to this virus in pregnancy will not result in serious harm to the baby. However, in a small number of cases, the infection can cause the baby to become anaemic. If the baby's blood count becomes too low it can make the baby very unwell in the womb and intrauterine death can result. Fortunately, this tragic outcome is **extremely rare** if the baby's infection is diagnosed promptly, the baby is monitored appropriately and treatment started if necessary.

What is my status? How will I know if I am at risk of infection?

Approximately 50-60% of adults have been infected with Parvovirus at some point in the past and are immune to reinfection. A simple blood test can tell you if:

- You had this infection before and are now immune.
- You currently have the infection.
- You have not had this infection before and may be at risk of infection. Knowing your status will allow you to avoid high risk situations during pregnancy (where exposure to the virus is more likely).

What treatments are available if I get Parvovirus B19 when I am pregnant?

If the results of your blood test confirm that you have been exposed to parvovirus in pregnancy, your doctor will monitor your baby in the womb by performing regular scans to look for signs of anaemia (a low blood count). He or she might ask you to have frequent ultrasound examinations for several weeks. If the baby shows signs of severe anaemia, an intrauterine blood transfusion is usually performed. This treatment is highly successful in reversing the anaemia. Fortunately, the intrauterine viral infection is usually short-lived and after treatment, the baby almost always continues to recover well.

If you have any questions, please contact your GP or community midwife in the first instance who will arrange for you to have a blood test.