

Parvovirus B19 Infection

Parvovirus B19 is a viral infection responsible for a common childhood disease, known as “Slapped Cheeks Disease” or “Fifth’s Disease”. It is spread by respiratory secretions (coughing, sneezing, hand to mouth contact, etc), and there are commonly outbreaks in the spring at day cares and schools. Women considered at increased risk are those who work with young children (primary school teachers, day care workers, etc) and mothers of young children. Frequent hand washing helps prevent the spread of Parvovirus. If you are at increased risk of exposure to Parvovirus, speak to your midwife about having a blood test done to determine if you are already immune.

Parvovirus is relatively harmless in children and non-pregnant adults. Signs and symptoms of parvovirus can vary in adults. The most common sign is arthritic-like joint pain. Occasionally, women may have a rash, low hemoglobin, and flu like symptoms. 20-25% of infections are without noticeable symptoms. Like the chicken pox, once you have had the disease, you cannot get it again. It is estimated that 50-60% of women are already immune, and we can do a blood test to determine this.

In pregnancy, it is possible for the virus to cross the placenta and affect the baby. It is very rare for this to happen. However, if your baby is affected, and you are less than 20 weeks pregnant, there is a moderate risk of miscarriage. If you are more than 20 weeks pregnant, there is a small risk that the virus will damage your baby’s red blood cells, causing severe anemia (a condition known as hydrops). Though we cannot stop the infection, we can draw your blood to see if you have contracted it. If you do have an infection with Parvovirus in pregnancy, your midwife will arrange for appropriate monitoring of your baby and consultation with a specialist.

Remember, if you are exposed to Parvovirus the most likely scenario is that both you and your baby will be unaffected. Half of women are already immune to the virus. Of those who are not immune, most will not become infected. Even if you are infected, it is very likely that your baby will be well.

If you have been exposed to Parvovirus and have never been tested for immunity, please let your midwife know right away.