

Pregnant teachers fear virus

School boards move staff after recent outbreak reported

Fifth disease can harm fetus if contracted early by mother

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Some GTA school boards have been moving pregnant teachers due to an unusually large outbreak of fifth disease in the past two months.

Also known as parvovirus B19, fifth disease affects mostly school-aged children with mild flu-like symptoms, but it can harm a fetus if contracted by a woman in the first 20 weeks of pregnancy.

The Peel and Durham public school boards each have moved about 50 teachers out of schools where incidents of the virus have been reported.

Although public health authorities don't track the virus, Peel Medical Officer of Health Dr. David McKeown said there has been more than the usual number of inquiries to his office this year, suggesting an above-average outbreak.

Transmitted by coughing or sneezing, fifth disease incubates for four to 20 days following exposure. An infected person usually becomes ill with a mild fever, headaches and muscle aches, followed in a week to 10 days by a facial rash that may spread. The rash can last for weeks but isn't uncomfortable, said McKeown. The facial rash is the reason fifth disease is also called "slapped-cheek" disease. Generally no treatment is recommended, although in some cases Tylenol can alleviate symptoms, he said.

"Many people are exposed in childhood and if pregnant women are immune, they have very little to worry about. If a woman feels she's been exposed to a child with fifth disease, we recommend they consult with their physician. Depending on the situation, sometimes it's appropriate to do a blood test to see if the woman has previous immunity to the disease," he said.

A spokesperson for the Peel District School Board said there have been reports of the disease in about 90 schools over the past two months, but they seem to be tapering off. The board sent letters home with students identifying fifth disease, assuring parents they would get a letter if it showed up in their school and suggesting students see their doctor if they had concerns.

Although health authorities don't recommend isolating those who are infected with the virus, the school board decided staff members concerned about their pregnancies could work at alternative locations or use sick time until they could determine whether or not they were immune. Testing takes between 10 and 20 days, said communications director Brian Woodland.

"The board's gone beyond the recommendations of the medical officer of health because we felt it was an unusual circumstance," he said.

"Most people are unaware of whether or not they have had it, so we decided to accommodate them."

Only a couple of reports of fifth disease have been reported in the Toronto District School Board, said spokesperson Maureen Kaukinen.