



Little-known 'fifth disease' is attracting attention

By Anita Manning, USA TODAY
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Tammy Delancey had never heard of "fifth disease." She was five months pregnant with her second child, a girl, in 1997, when she got sick. Her body hurt all over, she says. "You pull up the blinds in the morning and your eyes hurt from the sun. I knew it wasn't morning sickness," she says.

Fifth disease is caused by a form of human parvovirus. It usually causes no symptoms or only mild ones, such as a rash on the cheeks in children. But in pregnant women, it can lead to potentially fatal anemia and heart problems in the fetus.

Delancey's was one of those rare, deadly cases. A month after her diagnosis, despite two fetal blood transfusions, she lost her baby.

Now, she hopes that by talking about it she will alert other women. "I know if I talk to enough people, it's going to help someone," she says.

Every year, schools across the country experience cases of fifth disease, experts say. This month, the Ottawa Department of Health in Ontario, Canada, has had reports of outbreaks from about 100 schools in the city. Last month in Brooklyn, N.Y., 19 children were sent to hospitals after they broke out in facial rashes.

The disease, named because it was the fifth rash-causing disease to be described by doctors (after scarlet fever, measles, rubella and roseola), is spread through the air by coughing or sneezing, by hand-to-mouth contact and through blood transfusions. It's contagious only before symptoms appear, and once someone has been infected, he or she is immune for life. About 50% of adults have had it.

"There are always outbreaks of fifth disease somewhere," says obstetrician John Rodis of Stamford (Conn.) Hospital. The virus that causes it, which is a different form of parvovirus than the one that infects dogs, tends to move around, seeking communities where there are a sizable number of people who are susceptible to it, he says.

In children it causes what is often described as a "slapped-cheek" rash on the cheeks, along with a low fever, and cold symptoms a few days before the rash appears. Infected adults can experience joint pain and swelling that can last two weeks or longer.

Pregnant women who know they have been exposed to the virus should be tested, Rodis says. If they turn out to be infected, the pregnancy will be closely monitored to make sure the developing fetus is healthy. The risk of losing the pregnancy is 2% to 9%, he says.

There is no treatment for fifth disease and no vaccine, though one is in development.