



# Not a Giggle: My Experience With Hand-Foot-and-Mouth Disease as an Adult

Varsha Shridhar, PhD

(Fam Med 2013;45(8):582-3.)

**P**rior to my own experience, my exposure to adults getting childhood diseases was restricted to one instance, which I had read about in a collection of autobiographical essays. In “Birds, Beasts, and Relatives,” the naturalist Gerald Durrell described the reaction of his eldest brother, Larry, upon hearing that he had been infected with mumps.<sup>1(p.119)</sup>

“You mean I’ll swell up and start looking like a bull elephant?” asked Larry in horror.

“Mmm, er, yes,” said Theodore, finding he could not better this description.

“It’s a plot to make me sterile!” shouted Larry. “You and your bloody tincture of bat’s blood! You’re jealous of my virility.” Not surprisingly, I was prepared to approach any case of an adult getting a childhood disease with a giggle.

Coming from India, my husband, a family physician, and I felt confident that we would have been exposed to most childhood diseases and would have immunity to them. Once our toddler started daycare, we were surprised to find that we routinely suffered colds, sniffles, and other minor ailments. We were philosophical about the possibility of our son getting infected with something more serious than upper respiratory tract infections. When the notification came from the daycare center

about a child being diagnosed with hand-foot-and-mouth disease, my husband and I shrugged, expressed aloud a hope that our son would not get it, and forgot about it.

A couple of days later, I felt discomfort in my throat while swallowing and a vague feeling of nausea. By the next day, my throat felt worse, my eyes burned, and I felt feverish. As soon as I finished my experiments for the day at the laboratory where I am a postdoctoral research fellow, I came home, huddled beneath thick covers in the middle of a hot summer’s day, scratched my palms, and tried to tell myself that I would not fall sick.

I woke up the next day, feeling weak and exhausted, and also bewildered about the incessant itching on my palms. Close scrutiny showed seven little red bumps. Technology is wonderful: I snapped pictures of the bumps, then e-mailed them to my husband. He called me back to say “You are in the wrong population group. And the presentation seems a bit atypical. But I think you have hand-foot-and-mouth disease.” A child’s disease. How bad could it be? A quick search online told me that the course of the disease would be mild, lasting about a week, that I was probably highly contagious and should stay at home, and that adults who got the disease would have itchy rashes.<sup>2</sup>

Oh, CDC website! If only you could have better prepared me for just how itchy those rashes got! I felt like Tantalus pining for water in the lake that receded just out of reach every time he wanted a drink. Just as he could not get his thirst out of his mind, so could I not get the sheer maddening itchiness of my rashes out of mine. I could not scratch those itchy bumps: they were too inflamed and tender. My mother, visiting from India at this time, suggested a traditional remedy for soothing rashes: using turmeric powder mixed in castor oil. While not an FDA-approved treatment, rubbing the turmeric-oil mixture on my palms seemed to have many benefits: the mild abrasiveness of the turmeric helped scratch the itchiness, the bright yellow of the turmeric marked everything I touched and served as a warning to everybody else in the house, and it gave me something to do when the itchiness got out of control. By the end of the first day, my throat was so sore that I found it impossible to swallow solid foods and relied on soups. The bumps on my hands grew in number and size. I estimate that there were 20 bumps on both my hands by the evening of

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From the Department of Medicine, University of Pittsburgh.

that day, giving a rate of 13 bumps in 10 hours, or 1.3 bumps per hour, a pointless mathematical calculation that, nonetheless, momentarily kept my mind off the infuriating itchiness. By that night, to my growing dread, my feet started itching too, and the next morning showed a fine scattering of little red sore bumps on the soles of my feet. I could neither walk, nor use my fingers. I spent the day in bed watching endless movies and drinking large quantities of honeyed water for my throat. My father predicted, “So first the hands, and then the feet. I suppose your mouth will be next, if the name of the disease is anything to go by.” I groaned. But he was right. By the third day, my throat was less sore, but my mouth

was covered in dozens of painful eruptions. Unlike the sores on my hands and feet, these became more tender and painful over 3 days and spread to all corners of my mouth and tongue, making it nearly impossible to talk, let alone eat. My husband bought me an oral anesthetic, but once the numbing effect wore off, my mouth hurt even more. My mother resorted to putting all my food in the blender for me to gulp down.

After 3 more days of hanging about at home, I went back to work, armed with ibuprofen tablets. I spoke in grunts and sign language, the sores on my tongue still being tender. A few days later, I was back to normal. Neither my son nor any of the adults in my household

got infected—perhaps a tribute to the powers of turmeric. As for myself, I managed to catch up with all the movies I wanted to watch and all the novels I wanted to read. And yes, when I told my lab mates about the disease I had contracted, I did get some giggles.

**CORRESPONDENCE:** Address correspondence to Dr Shridhar, Magee Women’s Research Institute, Lab B430N, 204 Craft Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213. 412-979-6127. vas30@pitt.edu.

## References

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