CYTOMEGALOVIRUS (CMV)

What is it?

Cytomagalovirus (CMV) is a common viral infection throughout the world. In Europe 60% of people have had the infection by adulthood. CMV is medically important because it can damage babies in the womb (congenital infection) and can cause diseases in immunosuppressed people. Congenital infection with CMV happens sometimes when a pregnant woman is infected with CMV for the first time. As she has no immunity to CMV, the virus can cross the placenta to infect her baby. This occurs in about 1,800 babies born in England and Wales each year. Nine out of ten babies infected in this way will be well and healthy, so the CMV infection is unnoticed and unimportant. Occasionally there may be long term effects, but this is rare.

How do I know someone has it?

Mild infections similar to glandular fever can occur in young people. The disease caused by CMV in people with impaired immunity (eg those with AIDS or on immunosuppressive drugs) include fevers, pneumonia, inflammation of the retina of the eye (retinitis) and inflammation of the liver (hepatitis).

Is it infectious?

CMV is present in the saliva, urine and blood of people who have had a recent infection. Mouth to mouth kissing and poor hygiene can cause spread.

Is there any treatment?

There is no vaccine available. There are anti-viral drugs which can control CMV infection in people with impaired immunity, thus reducing the damage caused. If a woman gets CMV in pregnancy, the infection is likely to be noticed and there is a good chance that her child will not be harmed, so termination of pregnancy is rarely advised.

What should I do if someone has the illness?

- There is no need for special precautions because CMV is a common virus.
- Personal hygiene should always be observed. Hands should be washed in warm soapy water and dried after handling nappies or using the toilet and before eating or handling food.
- Cuts should be covered.

How soon can someone return to work or school?

There is no period of exclusion of the infected person.