FIFTH DISEASE
("Slapped Cheek" Disease or Erythema Infectiosum)

What is it?
Fifth disease is caused by a virus (human parvo virus). It is usually mild, occurring in small outbreaks among children, particularly in the spring. More than half of adults have been infected in the past and are now immune.

How do I know if someone has it?
Children with it develop a characteristic red rash on the cheeks, as if they have been slapped. This is followed by a lace-like rash on the body and limbs which may last up to 3 weeks, often fading but returning when exposed to sunlight or heat. Adults may also experience pain and inflammation of their joints (arthritis). A few people get anaemia.

Is it infectious?
Yes, the person is infectious before the onset of the rash. It is most commonly spread by respiratory droplets through coughing and sneezing.

What is the incubation period?
The illness may occur 4 - 20 days after contact with an infected person.

Is there any treatment?
No treatment is usually necessary.

Who can be seriously affected by the disease?

Pregnant women could be affected (especially in the first 20 weeks) as the infection may cause a miscarriage or affect the unborn child. If there has been contact with a case, advice should be sought from whoever is giving antenatal care as soon as possible. Those with poor resistance to infection (the immunosuppressed) and patients with haemolytic anaemia should avoid contact with those who are likely to be infected.

How soon can someone return to school or work?
Once they feel physically well.