

Letter to the Editor

Tomato flu-a tell-tale sign of another pandemic or just a benign manifestation of hand foot mouth disease

Sir,

The world is still dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, but of a gentle variant. In the midst of the global crisis, in God's own land (Kerala), media highlighted cases of febrile illness similar to flu with red round skin lesions that bear a resemblance to tomatoes that have emerged in children younger than 5 years, known as tomato flu or tomato fever.¹ It could be an aftereffect of chikungunya or dengue, rather than a new viral illness. Numerous reports claim that the tomato flu is truly a viral HFMD variant.^{2,3} Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is a common febrile illness characterised by a rash caused by enteroviruses, including Coxsackie A16 (CA16), EV A71, Coxsackie A6, Coxsackie B, and Echo viruses.⁴

It usually manifests as a fever with rash and agonising joint pain very similar to dengue or chikungunya. The painful, red blister rashes that spread widely and eventually grew to the size of tomatoes gave the disease its name. The blisters resemble those caused by the monkey pox virus.² It includes symptoms similar to those of dengue or chikungunya, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, tiredness, myalgia, and joint swelling.¹ Although it is not fatal, a few reports from doctors in Singapore indicated a polio-like illness causing paralysis and neurological disorder.⁵ The disease pandemic was initially noted in 2001 in Kozhikode. The virus is evolving, affecting children older than 5 years and involving other parts of the body such as the chest, pelvis, and abdomen as well. The disease has now spread to other areas of the nation, including the north east, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha.⁵

Similar to other types of flu, tomato flu is quite contagious, so it's important to isolate any suspected or confirmed cases. After the onset of symptoms, the patient should be kept in isolation for five to seven days.¹ It is mandatory to maintain hygiene and cleanliness of the environment to stop the progression of the disease.

A report published in *Lancet* respiratory medicine on August 17, 2022, stating tomato flu as a new viral disease, created lots of hue and cry among the medical fraternity. It's created a fear of a new pandemic in the making. Numerous studies that were later published in

reputable medical journals support the claim that it is only an HFMD manifestation. Another study named "Kerala tomato flu-a manifestation of hand foot mouth disease" published in the pediatric infectious disease journal made it abundantly evident that enterovirus was to blame for tomato flu.⁴ In this study, a viral swab of a lesion was collected from two children who had symptoms resembling tomato flu and sent for PCR. They were tested positive for enterovirus CA16.⁴ Hence, it may just be a benign manifestation of HFMD, but it could evolve into a fatal viral sickness in the future.

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