

China: Hand, foot and mouth virus kills 18 kids

March 27 2009, By CHI-CHI ZHANG , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Chinese health officials said Friday that hand, foot and mouth disease has sickened 41,000 people across the country and killed 18 children so far this year.

The outbreak appears more widespread than in recent years, based on previously released data, with around twice the number of people infected than during the same period last year.

The disease typically strikes infants and children, and while occasionally deadly, most cases are mild with children recovering quickly after suffering little more than a fever and rash.

Li Xinwang, a doctor at Beijing's Ditan Hospital, said the peak season for the spread of the virus is usually May through July, but that this year's early spike in cases indicates the toll will likely be higher than average.

He attributed the high number of cases early in the year to "dramatic temperature fluctuations" which helped spread the virus, particularly in rural areas where sanitation is poor and health care is substandard.

Vivian Tam, a spokeswoman for the World Health Organization in [China](#), said the apparent jump in cases could be partly due to more awareness.

"One reason the numbers have increased this year is not necessarily

because there are more cases, but rather, there is more reporting of cases than before," said Tam.

Health ministry spokesman Deng Haihua did not give comparable figures for other years, making it difficult to accurately compare with previous outbreaks.

The health ministry has said that China had about 80,000 hand, foot and mouth cases and 17 deaths in 2007.

State media reported last year that the virus sickened 27,000 people and killed dozens in the first few months of 2008 before reports of outbreaks subsided in May. China's central Anhui was the worst-hit province with 26 deaths. It's not known how many died nationwide.

Deng told reporters that 94 percent of all the patients this year were under five years of age. He said officials were stepping up prevention and awareness efforts to deal with the outbreak but that the virus would likely continue to spread.

Hand, foot and mouth disease is characterized by fever, mouth sores and a rash with blisters. It is spread by direct contact with nose and throat discharges, saliva, fluid from blisters, or the stool of infected persons. It is not related to hoof and mouth disease, which infects cattle, sheep and pigs.

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