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What is Mononucleosis

Mononucleosis is an infection caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. You may have heard it called “mono,” “Epstein-Barr virus,” or “the kissing disease.”

Who gets it?

Over the course of a lifetime, almost everyone is exposed to Epstein-Barr virus, but many people never develop any of the typical symptoms of infectious mononucleosis. They do, nonetheless, acquire immunity and protection; and, in general, people get mononucleosis only once.

In underdeveloped countries, people are often exposed to EBV in early childhood. Their illness is milder than that of older people and may resemble that of a typical cold or mild nonspecific “viral illness.” In developed countries, such as the U. S., first exposure is more likely to be delayed until high school or college age. In this group, infection with the EB virus is more likely to be symptomatic and often results in the typical symptoms we know as “mono.” Older adults can develop mononucleosis, and their illness is likely to be different from that of children or young adults.

How is it spread?

The virus is spread from person to person via saliva (on hands, or by kissing, coughing, or sneezing). It has rarely been transmitted via blood transfusion.

What are the signs/symptoms?

Symptoms of mononucleosis in college-age persons usually include fever, sore throat, swollen glands in the neck, and fatigue. Some also experience headaches, decreased appetite, abdominal pains, and rash. For some, the symptoms are few and mild; others may be so ill that they are unable to eat or drink or look after themselves. Most people are somewhere in-between and may need to take time off from work or classes.

How long does it take to get symptoms?

Symptoms develop about four to six weeks after the time of exposure.

Are there lab tests for “mono”?

Your clinician can perform a blood test called a “mono spot.” This test usually turns positive shortly after the onset of symptoms, but in some cases the test will remain negative for one week or longer despite illness.

Some people never develop a positive test. In such cases your clinician may order more specific blood tests to establish the diagnosis. Other tests (blood counts and liver tests) may be ordered to help rule out some of the complications associated with mono.



How long will I be sick?

The illness may last seven to ten days, but varies widely from person to person. It may take several weeks to fully recover normal stamina. It is believed that on rare occasions people may develop “chronic” or “recurrent” mono. The vast majority of people recover completely.

How long am I contagious?

The EB virus begins to be shed in the throat with the onset of symptoms and continues during the illness. Avoid activities that involve the transfer of saliva with someone if you are infected with the virus (e.g., sharing lip balm, drinking glasses, toothbrushes).

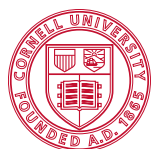
The average length of time a person is contagious after onset of illness is six months. The EB virus remains in the body for life, and periodically can be found in small amounts in the throat in otherwise completely healthy persons. For this reason, it is good to limit the casual sharing of body fluids at all times.

Are roommates at risk?

Mono is transmitted via infected saliva, so casual contact with an infected person does not increase the risk of illness. In fact, roommates of people who have mono have no greater chance of getting mono than anyone else on campus. Taking precautions to avoid coming into contact with infected saliva is the best way to reduce your risk of illness. There is no need to move into another room.

What about treatment?

There are no specific “antiviral” therapies for mononucleosis. The most important things you



can do are to rest and drink plenty of fluids. Treatment of symptoms with medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol and others) or decongestants may be of some help.

Antibiotics may be prescribed if a secondary bacterial infection develops. Prednisone may be given to persons with severe swelling of the tonsils or other such complications of mono.

Are there any precautions I should take while I am ill?

Mononucleosis frequently affects the liver to varying degrees, so you should avoid alcohol during the illness.

One of the rare, but most serious, complications of mono is rupture of the spleen. The spleen is an organ about the size of your fist which normally lies well-protected behind the ribs in the upper left area of the abdomen. Your clinician may recommend no strenuous activity or contact sports for 4-6 weeks from the onset of illness.

You should seek medical care immediately if you develop significant persistent pain in the left upper abdomen or lower left chest, or if you start to feel weak and light-headed, especially if you have experienced any trauma to the abdomen.

If you have mono, or think you do...

- Call Cornell Health at 607-255-5155 to schedule an appointment.
- Get plenty of rest: it's the key to recovery.
- Drink lots of fluids to keep your body hydrated.
- Take acetaminophen to ease painful symptoms.
- Avoid alcohol until you are fully recovered.
- Notify your clinician if your symptoms get worse.