

MONONUCLEOSIS (“Mono,” “Kissing Disease”)

What is mononucleosis?

Infectious mononucleosis, also called “mono,” is a contagious, typically mild, viral disease. Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) is the most common cause of infectious mononucleosis, but other viruses can also cause this disease such as cytomegalovirus, adenovirus, and several others. It is common among teenagers and young adults, especially college students.

How is mononucleosis spread?

Mononucleosis is spread person to person, through bodily fluids like saliva. Transmission can occur by kissing or sharing items contaminated with saliva (i.e., drinking cups, bottles, and toys). Viruses that cause mono can also spread through blood, semen during sexual contact, blood transfusions, and organ transplants. A person can become sick up to four to six weeks after being exposed to the virus.

What are the symptoms of mononucleosis?

Typical symptoms of mononucleosis include fever, sore throat, extreme fatigue, swollen lymph nodes in the neck and armpits; head and body aches; a swollen liver and/or spleen; and rash.

Symptoms for mono may develop slowly and may not all occur at the same time. Some infected individuals will not have any symptoms. An enlarged spleen or an enlarged liver are less common symptoms but for some individuals, they remain enlarged even after fatigue ends. Most people see symptoms resolve in two to four weeks; however, some people may feel fatigued for several more weeks.

How is mononucleosis treated?

There is no specific treatment for infectious mononucleosis, other than treating the symptoms. There are no antiviral drugs or vaccines available for mononucleosis or EBV. You can help relieve symptoms of infectious mono by drinking fluids to stay hydrated, getting plenty of rest, and taking over-the-counter medications for pain and fever.

Antibiotics such as penicillin, ampicillin, or amoxicillin should not be taken to treat mononucleosis. Based on the severity of the symptoms, a health care provider may recommend treatment of specific organ systems affected by infectious mononucleosis.

Can I prevent my children from getting mononucleosis?

Good handwashing after any contact with saliva, or items contaminated with saliva, is probably the single most effective means of controlling transmission and preventing spread of this disease. Transmission can be prevented by not kissing or sharing food, drinks, or personal items, like toothbrushes, with people who have infectious mononucleosis. Be sure to properly clean and disinfect toys that have been exposed to saliva after each use.

Do infected individuals need to be excluded from work or school?

Individuals with mononucleosis do not need to be excluded from work or school.

Since children can have the virus without any symptoms, and people can be contagious for such a long period of time, excluding children (or staff) from childcare centers or school is not necessary. Children may be excluded from school if they are unable to participate or require more care than staff are able to provide without compromising the safety of other children.

Individuals who develop a swollen spleen with mononucleosis should avoid contact sports until they are fully recovered and cleared by a health care provider to avoid rupturing the organ.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, About Infectious Mononucleosis, <https://www.cdc.gov/epstein-barr/about-mono.html>

Division of Public Health's Child Care Manual, "Managing Infectious Disease in Childcare Settings," <https://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/files/ChildCareManual2021.pdf>