

Infectious Mononucleosis

What is it?

Infectious Mononucleosis (Mono) is an Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) infection of the lymphatic system. It is usually passed to susceptible people through intimate contact with infected saliva. Over 50% of college students have antibodies to the EB virus, implying prior infection. Approximately 12% of the people who previously were without antibodies develop them each year. However, in only one-third to two-thirds of these new infections do people develop symptoms of mononucleosis. This means many people, including children, have infectious mono without realizing it.

The usual incubation time from exposure to the virus to onset of illness symptoms is one to two months. Once infected, some people may continue to shed the virus in their oral secretions for several months even though they feel normal. Recovery produces immunity that will nearly always prevent subsequent mono re-infections. Several other types of infections can produce symptoms identical to infectious mono and occasionally similar white blood cell count changes.

Symptoms

Early symptoms may be a mild headache, easy fatigability, fever and a sore throat. The lymph nodes in the neck (and often also in the armpits and groin) and the tonsils in the throat enlarge, and it becomes painful to swallow. The voice is distorted by the swelling. As the disease progresses, the tiredness becomes more severe, and may approach total exhaustion. A rash may occur.



The liver, located under the right lower rib cage, may become painful if the infection causes a mono hepatitis. Mild jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), and an anemia may occur. Decreased appetite is common, nausea and vomiting are less common.

The spleen, located under the left lower rib cage, is enlarged in about two-thirds of the cases and may also become painful. Rupture of the spleen, causing internal bleeding, can be a fatal complication. While a rare occurrence, rupture is most likely to occur within three weeks of the onset of infectious mono symptoms and can happen from even a mild blow to the abdomen.

Treatment

As with most other viral infections such as measles, mumps, or a cold, there is not a specific treatment. Antibiotics will not help. Rest, nutrition, hydration, and time are important. Ibuprofen or naproxen may help with discomfort.



One of the most common complaints about mono is a severe sore throat. There are several things you can do for temporary relief. These include sucking on hard candies to stimulate salivation, or frequently gargling with a liquid such as one-half teaspoon salt in six ounces of warm water. You can also purchase mild anesthetic gargles or sore throat lozenges. If necessary a stronger prescription anesthetic, lidocaine jelly, can be used as a gargle and then spit out. These may be especially helpful just prior to a meal. If your tonsils are so enlarged as to obstruct breathing and/or swallowing, your practitioner may reduce them by giving you a few days of prednisone tablets.

Sometimes a streptococcal bacterial throat infection may accompany mono. If a throat culture indicates you also have strep, antibiotics will be prescribed for you. One antibiotic, Amoxicillin, is usually avoided in mono because it can cause a rash, which is not necessarily an allergic rash.

Do not share eating or drinking utensils or toothbrush. Always wash your hands before food preparation, eating, and after bathroom use.



Recovery

The fever usually subsides within 10-14 days. The enlarged lymph nodes and spleen return to normal within a few weeks. The recovery time varies greatly with the individual and with the amount of rest one gets. Most people feel 90% return of their stamina in 2 weeks, full recovery may take 2 months or longer.

Moderate activity, determined by how your body feels, will not delay your recovery. Prolonged bed rest does not make people get well sooner. Unnecessary bed rest deconditions muscles and may leave you feeling weaker than if you continued activity as your body tolerated it.

Be patient, return to activities as tolerated, but don't overdo it.

Precautions

Avoid Alcohol



Many people with infectious mono also have a mild liver inflammation, or hepatitis. Alcohol must be metabolized by the liver and may be toxic to liver cells. Be kind to your liver and don't drink alcoholic beverages while you are recovering. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) must also be metabolized by your liver and should be avoided.

No Contact Sports or "Rough-Housing" for 4 to 6 weeks After Your Diagnosis

This means any activity that could result in a blow or trauma to your abdomen. It could be extremely dangerous. An enlarging spleen can be more easily ruptured causing internal bleeding and an emergency operation. Specific recommendations for you should be discussed with your clinician.



Other rare complications can occur. Airway obstruction due to enlarged tonsils, severe headache, partial paralysis, confusion, dizziness upon standing, dark urine, or abdominal pain should be reported to your clinician or an emergency room immediately.

Questions? Call 346-4646.