



Mononucleosis

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Mononucleosis is caused by the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) and most commonly affects young adults aged 15 to 35. EBV is a type of herpes virus. Most people become infected with it at some point, but not everyone develops mononucleosis. The transmission of EBV requires intimate contact with the saliva of an infected person. Transmission through the air or blood does not normally occur.

The clinical diagnosis of mononucleosis is suggested by symptoms, such as fever, sore throat, and swollen lymph glands, as well as by the age of the patient. A swollen spleen or liver may also develop.

Usually lab tests are needed to confirm the diagnosis. Results of infected individuals include elevated white blood cell count, an increased percentage of certain atypical white blood cells, and a positive reaction to a "mono spot" test.

There is no specific treatment for mononucleosis, other than treating the symptoms. The infection is almost never fatal.

Anne's case

When Anne, 15, came home from soccer practice with a headache and unusual body aches and pain, she thought she'd caught the flu that was going around at school. By the next morning, Anne's temperature had soared to 39 C and her throat felt like she'd swallowed hot coals. Even worse, she was so tired, she could hardly lift her head off the pillow.

Anne's mom took her to see a doctor who, after blood tests and a physical exam, diagnosed Anne with mononucleosis. She was also diagnosed with a swollen spleen associated with the infection.

Anne wanted to know when she could get back to school, soccer, and her other daily activities.

Her doctor said she must refrain from physical activity for at least one month, so as to limit the chance of a ruptured spleen and to prevent the infection from spreading to others.

Modified from: <http://kidshealth.org>

Some common myths held by patients


Myth #1: Feeling tired all the time is a sure sign of mononucleosis.

What to tell your patients: While fatigue is one of the symptoms, it alone does not confirm the diagnosis. Further, there is no way to definitively identify mononucleosis without a blood test.

Myth #2: If I get mononucleosis once, I will probably get it again.

What to tell your patients: Generally, people who have had mononucleosis once will not get it again, despite the fact that EBV remains in a person's system forever once he/she has been infected. The infection may appear in the saliva from time to time, but the actual symptoms of mononucleosis don't usually reappear.

Myth #3: I can avoid the disease by not kissing anyone who is infected.

What to tell your patients: Despite popular belief, mononucleosis is not merely a "kissing disease," although it can be contracted that way. There is no real way to avoid contracting the infection because even symptom-free people can carry the virus in their saliva. 

Surf your way to...

1. KidsHealth:
<http://kidshealth.org>
2. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
www.cdc.gov
3. Health Canada
www.hc-sc.gc.ca (type Epstein-Barr virus in the search bar)