

Mononucleosis

Background Information

Mononucleosis is an acute infectious disease that affects the respiratory system, the liver, and the lymphatic system. It is most often caused by the Epstein-Barr virus and commonly occurs in 15 to 24 year olds. It is spread by close contact such as kissing, sharing food or drinks, and by coughing or sneezing. The incubation period (time from exposure to symptoms) is 4 to 6 weeks. The diagnosis is made by a blood test.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Signs and symptoms include sore throat; fever; loss of appetite; fatigue; swollen lymph glands in the neck, under the arms, or groin; abdominal pain; headache; and general body aches. The liver and spleen are usually involved and may become enlarged. Yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice) may occur. A ruptured spleen is a rare complication. Unless blood tests are done, mononucleosis may not be detected since many of the symptoms are similar to a cold, tonsillitis or digestive disturbances. Blood tests are usually delayed until the second week of the illness because tests performed too early may be falsely negative.

Treatment

Bed rest, fluids and good nutrition are the best treatment. Antibiotics are ineffective because the illness is due to a virus and some antibiotics can actually cause a body rash when given during mononucleosis. No antiviral medications are effective against mononucleosis. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) can be very useful in controlling throat pain, headache, muscle aches and fever. Aspirin is generally avoided in patients less than 19 years of age because its use seems to increase the risk of a type of encephalitis called Reyes Syndrome. A short course of steroid is sometimes considered if tonsil swelling is extreme and inhibits breathing. The discomfort typically lasts 10 – 14 days and fatigue often persists for 4 to 6 weeks. Occasionally, people will also have a strep infection at the same time. In such cases, antibiotics are used.

Recommendations

- Rest in bed until the fever subsides. Cover your cough with tissues, throw away the tissues and then immediately wash your hands. Wash your hands frequently.
- Maintain proper nutrition. Because of loss of appetite and sore throat, a diet of soups, juices, milkshakes, and bland foods may be better tolerated.
- No contact sports or strenuous exercise for at least 6 weeks. Trauma to the abdomen may possibly rupture the spleen. Alcohol should not be used until after this interval of time because of the recovering inflammation of the liver caused by the virus.
- Increase fluid intake to a least 8 glasses a day.
- Gargle with warm salt water (1/4 tsp regular salt in ½ cup warm water) to help ease sore throat.

(Over)

When to call your healthcare provider

- If you are unable to control a high temperature (over 101°)
- If breathing becomes difficult or noisy
- If sudden severe abdominal pain occurs and lasts longer than 5 minutes
- If severe headache, rash, neck pain or stiffness occurs
- If symptoms seem to be getting worse instead of better after one or two weeks