



St. Vincent Physician Network

Infectious Mononucleosis: What it is and How is it Treated

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What is Mono?

Mononucleosis, sometimes called "mono" or the "kissing disease," is caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. While "mono" can occur at any age, it is most commonly seen in teens and young adults. A case of "mono" can keep you out of commission for weeks to months. You might be surprised to learn that many of your friends have already had "mono, even if they cannot ever recall having the symptoms of mono. Because most teenagers who contract mono have such a mild case, they never realized that a past scratchy sore throat when they were five or an unusual bout of being tired when they were in third grade was actually "mono."

How did I get mono?

You've probably heard people call mono the "kissing disease." So how did you catch mono if you haven't kissed anyone romantically recently?

Here's how. The Epstein-Barr virus is found in the saliva of another person who has "mono" and is spread by ways other than kissing. You can catch mono from another person if they cough or sneeze in your face. Or if you sip from the same straw or drink from the same glass after an infected person. Mono probably is more common in adolescence because teens tend to hang out together in close contact with each other. Contrary to what most parents think, mono is not caught that easily. Most of your peers are already immune, having picked up the virus at an early age. Therefore, it is unlikely that your boyfriend, girlfriend, roommate, or other family members will get sick from you. However, it is still best to use separate drinking glasses and utensils and avoid kissing until the fever has been gone for several days.

The incubation period for mononucleosis is four to 10 weeks after contact with an infected person. This means you will not get sick for four to 10 weeks after exposure to the virus. You will be most contagious as long as you have a fever and might even carry a small amount of the virus in your saliva for up to 12 months after you are feeling better.

What are the symptoms of infectious mononucleosis?

- chills
- fever
- general body muscle aches
- feeling depressed
- feeling very tired
- severe sore throat; tonsils may be red, enlarged, and covered with pus, which may make the doctor think you have a "strep" throat
- headaches
- swollen and tender lymph glands in your neck, armpits, and groin
- skin rash
- enlarged spleen (an organ beneath the ribs on your left side)

How will the doctor know I have mono for sure?

The diagnosis can be tricky so do not try to diagnose yourself. Infectious mononucleosis may take several days to even weeks to develop and the same symptoms occur in many other diseases. For these reasons, "mono" is frequently confused with a bout of the flu or a strep throat. The illness is confirmed by having the symptoms described above and a positive blood test showing antibodies against the Epstein-Barr virus. This test may have to be repeated because the test is often negative in the illnesses' early stages and converts to being positive later. In addition, your doctor may look at your blood under the microscope and see a large number of unusually shaped white blood cells with one nucleus (mononuclear), thus the term "mononucleosis."

What medication will the doctor prescribe for me to get better?

There is no magic pill to cure mononucleosis. Antibiotics do not work. In fact, certain antibiotics will make mono worse. 90% of people with mononucleosis will develop a severe rash if they take ampicillin or amoxicillin, (the "pink medicine" you took when you were little).

Your doctor will probably tell you to:

- get plenty of rest - you will probably be so tired that this will not be a problem. But you probably do not need to stay in bed. Strict bed rest will not make mono go away faster. You can decide how much rest you need but definitely take it easy.
- drink lots of fluids. Milk shakes and cold drinks are especially good. Avoid citrus fruits (they might hurt your throat!) Gargle with plenty of warm salt water, or suck on hard candy or popsicles.
- stop most of your exercise
- get plenty of sleep
- do not smoke, drink, or take drugs
- It is best not to take any medication unless recommended by your doctor. The pain of swollen lymph nodes and fever more than 102 degrees F (39 degree's C) can usually be relieved by appropriate doses of acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil). Ask your doctor if you should take a multivitamin pill until your appetite comes back.
- Your doctor will tell you when you can return to school. Most physicians say it is okay to attend school once your fever is gone. However, you still will probably feel very tired so keep things low-key and try getting extra rest. An afternoon nap might be just the ticket.

What if I do not follow my doctor's advice. What could happen?

- your illness may last longer
- your symptoms may worsen
- you may develop an enlarged spleen, which can be very dangerous. A blow to the stomach could rupture the enlarged spleen which would require emergency surgery. Therefore, teens with mononucleosis should avoid any contact sports until the spleen returns to normal size. That even means no cheerleading or wrestling with your friends until your doctor tells you that your spleen is okay. It is important to let your parents know immediately if you develop stomach pain high on your left side.
- you may get a secondary infection in your liver called hepatitis.
- you could get dehydrated from not drinking enough fluids

Since it will take two to three months until you are feeling your old self again, a bout of infectious mononucleosis can be a real "bummer." Missed parties. Tons of homework. Postponed exams. Sitting out a season of team sports. These are just a few of the ways that "mono" can affect your life.

You now know a lot more about infectious mononucleosis. Unfortunately, there are still plenty of people who will be afraid to get close to you while you are getting better, even though it is unlikely that you will transmit anything to them. So don't take it personally!

Getting through mono may be both challenging and depressing and seem to take forever. But if you rest when your body tells you to rest, you will lessen the chances of complications and be able to get back your life.

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