

Infectious Mononucleosis

Definition

“Mono” is short for infectious mononucleosis, an illness caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. It is characterized initially by mild headache, tiredness and decreased appetite followed by sore throat, fatigue, swollen glands, fever, muscle aches, and sometimes a swollen liver or spleen. Not all people with mono have all of the symptoms and the severity can vary. The symptoms usually last 1-4 weeks but some people can have lingering fatigue.

Testing

Mono is suspected based on symptoms and medical examination. Usually, a rapid confirmation test called Monospot is done. There is no test for the virus itself. The Monospot test checks for heterophile antibodies the body produces in response to the mono infection. It can take a number of days for the body to produce detectable levels of these antibodies. If the test is negative initially, it may be repeated if mono is still suspected. Alternatively, a more specific and more expensive test that takes days to process called Epstein-Barr virus titers can be done.

Contagious

Mono is spread by saliva hence it can be spread by kissing or sharing food, drinks, water bottles, straws, and utensils. After exposure, the virus incubates in the body for 10-60 days before the infected person has symptoms. There is no test available to see if a person is incubating the virus and will later become sick. After a person becomes well, she or he can continue to shed the virus in saliva for up to 18 months. A person gets infectious mononucleosis due to the Epstein - Barr virus only once but there are other viruses that can cause an illness similar to mono.

Complications

Mono usually causes a severe sore throat. Sometimes the throat becomes so swollen that there is difficulty in breathing and swallowing. Mono can also cause hepatitis or inflammation of the liver. This can result in jaundice, manifested by a yellowing of the skin and eyes. The spleen may also swell as a result of mono. In 1-2 persons out of every 1000 people with infectious mononucleosis, this swelling is so severe that the spleen may rupture. This is a life-threatening condition. The risk for rupture is increased with trauma to the abdomen. Therefore, a person with mono should not engage in contact sports or rigorous exercise for 6-8 weeks after the illness.

Treatment

Mono is a self-limited illness and there is no medicine that will cure the infection. Patients should rest, drink lots of fluids, use throat lozenges and take acetaminophen 650 milligrams every four to six hours (Tylenol) as needed. Rarely, steroid medications are used to shrink severely swollen tonsils. There are no specific restrictions on nonathletic activities, but patients should rest as much as necessary. Do not drink alcohol. After the symptoms are gone, normal activities may be resumed.

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