

HEALTH

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Mononucleosis

Illness is common and bothersome, but it can also be deadly if not monitored

By KATHY SEALE
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Most of the time, a diagnosis of infectious mononucleosis is more of a serious nuisance than a serious danger.

The worst outcome of the viral illness — commonly called mono, or the kissing disease — because it is often spread through saliva — usually is a combination of swollen lymph nodes, fever, sore throat, muscle aches, loss of appetite and exhaustion.

Occasionally, however, it can lead to life-threatening illness, even death. "I don't think anybody knew it was so dangerous," said Ann Pierce of Mountain Brook, whose 19-year-old son, Nick, died Christmas Eve, apparently from complications of the disease.

The teen had been ill for weeks, but no one knew until his death that he had mono, his mother said. Doctors in Tuscaloosa, where he attended the University of Alabama, diagnosed influenza and sinusitis. Later, a Birmingham doctor diagnosed strep throat and an emergency room doctor suspected strep-induced dehydration, she said.

"He had classic mono symptoms, swollen glands and high fever," said Mrs. Pierce, adding that her son was also tired, but he attributed that to final exams.

An autopsy confirmed mononucleosis and a ruptured spleen, Mrs. Pierce said. Obstructed breathing, possibly caused by throat swelling, another symptom of mono, also could have contributed to his death.

Deaths attributed to mono are rare, said Dr. Mark

Mononucleosis: The "kissing disease"

Mononucleosis, also called glandular fever, is caused by the Epstein-Barr virus, a virus of the herpes family.

Facts about the disease

1 Infection

Virus only infects B-lymphocytes, which are bigger than normal white blood cells with one kidney-shaped nucleus (hence name of disease, infectious mononucleosis).

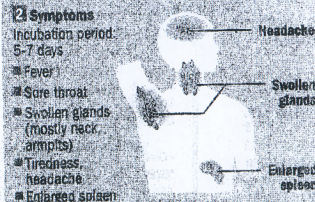
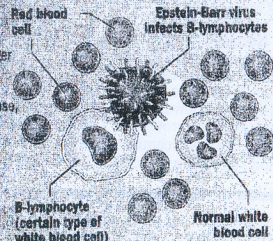
EBV spreads through contact with saliva of infected person. Virus remains latent after primary infection.

2 Symptoms

- Incubation period: 5-7 days
- Fever
- Sore throat
- Swollen glands (mostly neck, armpits)
- Tiredness, headache
- Enlarged spleen

Epstein-Barr virus will infect more than 90% of worldwide population during their lifetime, mostly without showing symptoms.

Sources: Family Medical Guide, The Bantam Medical Dictionary; "Krankheiten-Gesundheit"; "Familien-Stark-Lexikon"; research by Jutta Scheib



MONO: Complications can arise

From Page 1D

Stafford, an internist at University Hospital.

"It's very uncommon," he said. "I don't want to alarm people."

Mono occasionally leads to serious conditions such as meningitis, heart muscle inflammation or encephalitis, he said. More commonly, enlarged spleens — present in about half of mono victims — are the most serious concern, he said. An enlarged spleen could rupture, although that happens in less than 0.5 percent of cases.

Stafford explains an infected, enlarged spleen's susceptibility this way: A healthy spleen is the consistency of an unripe peach, while an enlarged spleen is the consistency of a ripe peach.

"If you take a regular peach and hit it, nothing will happen," he said. "If you hit a ripe one, it's going to split."

Normally the spleen, situated in the upper left side of the abdomen, is protected by the rib cage. If the spleen enlarges, it protrudes below the rib cage and loses that protection. Typically, doctors recommend that mono patients avoid activities

that could traumatize the spleen.

"You should avoid sports probably for at least six weeks," Stafford said.

In other words, doctors do not recommend emulating American speed skater Chris Witty. She was diagnosed with mono in mid-January but went on last week to capture Olympic gold in world-record time.

After a diagnosis of mononucleosis, potentially serious symptoms, such as abdominal pain, difficulty with swallowing or breathing, increasing headache or confused thinking, merit immediate attention, said Dr. Michael Reymann, an infectious disease specialist at Brookwood Hospital.

Mrs. Pierce advises parents to encourage teens — who might tend toward stoicism because they don't want to complain or because they don't want to miss out on activities — to be completely honest about symptoms.

"We teach them to be a man and don't complain," she said. "If you have those symptoms, that's not complaining, it could mean life or death."

There is no cure for mono, but adequate rest is important, doctors say. "We used to recommend bed rest, but most don't recommend that now," Stafford said, because complete bed rest could cause further weakness.

Antibiotics are ineffective, although doctors sometimes prescribe steroids for an obstructed airway.

The Epstein-Barr virus, which infects up to 90 percent of people worldwide at some point in their lives, is responsible for mononucleosis.

"Approximately 70 percent of the population is infected by age 30," Reymann said. Some people, usually young children and older adults, have no symptoms or only mild symptoms from mononucleosis, which tends to

hit hardest during late adolescence and young adulthood.

Because the symptoms of mono are similar to other illnesses, such as strep throat, it usually needs to be confirmed through blood tests.

"You can't make the diagnosis on how the person looks," Stafford said.

And once you've had mono, the virus remains latent in the body but rarely causes relapse, Reymann said.

"By and large, you are immune," he said.