Mononucleosis

What is Mononucleosis
Mononucleosis is an infection caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. You may have heard it called “mono,” “Epstein-Barr virus,” or “the kissing disease.”

Who gets it?
Nearly everyone is infected with Epstein-Barr virus at some point in their lives, but many people never develop any of the typical symptoms of infectious mononucleosis. They do, nonetheless, acquire immunity and protection; and, in general, people get mononucleosis only once.

In underdeveloped countries, people are more likely to contract EBV in early childhood. Infected children usually have a milder illness than that of older people. It may resemble that of a typical cold or mild nonspecific “viral illness.” In developed countries, such as the U.S., infection often occurs in children from exposure within their families, but is more likely to be delayed until high school or college age. In this group, infection with the EB virus is more likely to be symptomatic and often results in the typical symptoms we know as “mono.”

How is it spread?
Humans are the only known reservoir of EBV. The virus is spread from person to person primarily via saliva (on hands, or by kissing, coughing, or sneezing).

What are the signs/symptoms?
Symptoms of mononucleosis in college-age persons usually include fever, sore throat, swollen glands in the neck, and fatigue. Some also experience headaches, decreased appetite, abdominal pains, and rash. For some, the symptoms are few and mild; others may be so ill that they are unable to eat or drink or look after themselves. Most people are somewhere in-between and may need to take time off from work or classes.

How long does it take to get symptoms?
Symptoms develop about four to six weeks after the time of exposure.

Are there lab tests for “mono”?
Your clinician can perform a blood test called a “mono spot.” This test usually turns positive shortly after the onset of symptoms. Some people never develop a positive test. In such cases your clinician may order more specific blood tests to establish the diagnosis. Other tests (blood counts and liver tests) may be ordered to help rule out some of the complications associated with mono.

How long will I be sick?
The illness typically lasts seven to ten days, but varies widely from person to person. It may take several weeks to fully recover normal stamina.

How long am I contagious?
The EB virus begins to be shed in the throat with the onset of symptoms and continues for an average of six months. Individuals who have been infected may shed virus sporadically for the rest of their lives. The risk of contracting EBV is one reason to avoid casual exchange of saliva with others, such as sharing toothbrushes, lip balm, or drinking glasses.

Are roommates at risk?
There is no known benefit to isolation of those with mono and it is not necessary to change location if a roommate has mono nor to exclude ill individuals from the classroom.

What about treatment?
There are no specific “antiviral” therapies for mononucleosis. The most important things you can do are to rest and drink plenty of fluids. Treatment of symptoms with medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol and others) or decongestants may be of some help. Antibiotics may be prescribed if a secondary bacterial infection develops. Prednisone may be given to persons with severe swelling of the tonsils or other such complications of mono.

Are there any precautions I should take while I am ill?
Mononucleosis frequently affects the liver to varying degrees, so you should avoid alcohol during the illness.
One of the rare, but most serious, complications of mono is rupture of the spleen. The spleen is an organ about the size of your fist which normally lies well-protected...
behind the ribs in the upper left area of the abdomen. It becomes more fragile during mono infection. Your clinician may recommend no strenuous activity or contact sports for 4-6 weeks from the onset of illness. You should seek medical care immediately if you develop significant persistent pain in the left upper abdomen or lower left chest, or if you start to feel weak and light-headed, especially if you have experienced any trauma to the abdomen.

Nausea or severe sore throat may interfere with the ability to eat or drink, and may lead to dehydration. If you are emptying your bladder less than every 8 hours or have dry mouth, you should seek medical consultation.

It is common for individuals with mono to be so ill that they cannot attend to their academic responsibilities for a period of time. Your clinician can help you with advice about how to seek academic accommodations if need be.

**If you have mono, or think you do...**

- Call Cornell Health at 607-255-5155 to schedule an appointment.
- Get plenty of rest; it’s the key to recovery.
- Drink lots of fluids to keep your body hydrated.
- Take acetaminophen to ease painful symptoms.
- Avoid alcohol until you are fully recovered.
- Notify your clinician if your symptoms get worse.