

# Mononucleosis (Infectious Mononucleosis)

Infectious mononucleosis—sometimes known as “mono”—is caused by infection with a virus called Epstein-Barr virus (EBV). Symptoms vary but may include swollen lymph glands, sore throat, and tiredness. There are usually no complications, although it may take several weeks for mononucleosis to clear up completely.

## What is mononucleosis?

Infectious mononucleosis is a common, usually mild illness. It is most often caused by infection with the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV). Since EBV is spread by saliva, close contact, such as kissing or young children playing together, spreads the disease. Other viruses can cause similar illnesses. It may take a while before your child recovers fully.

## What does it look like?

Symptoms of infectious mononucleosis vary, but the most common are:

- Tiredness and fatigue.
- Sore throat.
- Swollen lymph glands, especially in the neck.
- Fever, headache, stomachache, nausea, rashes, and muscle aches.
- Symptoms often come on gradually.
- Pain in the left upper part of the abdomen that may be caused by enlargement of the spleen.
- Younger children have mild symptoms or none at all.

## What causes mononucleosis?

Mononucleosis is usually caused by EBV. The virus spreads by close contact with saliva, such as kissing or sharing food. It may spread in day-care centers or schools.

- Nearly everyone is infected by EBV some time before adulthood. However, not everyone who catches EBV will get mononucleosis. The chances of getting sick seem highest in teens and young adults.
- Once your child is infected with EBV, the virus may be present for life. However, it usually does not cause any further illness.

## What are some possible complications of mononucleosis?

Complications of mononucleosis are uncommon.

- There is a small risk that the swollen spleen will rupture or bleed. Your child should avoid contact sports such as football until the doctor gives permission, usually after a few weeks.
- Your child’s throat may become very swollen, causing difficulty breathing.
- Other complications, such as involvement of the nervous system, are rare.

## What puts your child at risk of mononucleosis?

- Infectious mononucleosis occurs mainly in adolescents and young adults. Although children under 4 years old may catch EBV, they often have mild symptoms or none at all.
- Your child can catch EBV only through close contact with saliva from an infected person. Casual contact does not pass the infection.

## How is mononucleosis diagnosed and treated?

Your doctor may recommend blood tests to be sure of the diagnosis. Since “mono” can look a lot like a “strep” throat, often a swab from your child’s throat will be tested for the streptococcus bacteria.

- For most cases there is no specific treatment that can help your child’s mononucleosis clear up any faster. Antibiotics are not used because they are not effective against viruses like EBV.
- If your child’s tonsils become so swollen that they interfere with breathing, he or she may receive steroid treatment.
- Medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen may help reduce fever and sore throat.
- Make sure that your child drinks enough liquids to prevent dehydration.
- Your child can be as active as his or her energy level permits.
- Your child can return to school when he or she is feeling better. It may still be possible to spread the virus, so have him or her avoid close contact (for example, kissing, sharing cups or food) with other children.

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- He or she should avoid contact sports, or other activities that could result in injury to the abdomen, until the doctor gives permission.
- Your child's symptoms should get better within 2 to 4 weeks. However, it may take several weeks longer until your child's energy level returns to normal.
- Increased tiredness and weakness.
- Severe sore throat or difficulty breathing or swallowing.
- Not drinking enough liquids to prevent dehydration.
- Sudden or severe abdominal pain, especially after an injury.

### **When should I call your office?**

The doctor may want to check your child again in 2 to 3 weeks. Call our office if your child's major symptoms haven't cleared up within 2 to 4 weeks or if your child develops any of the following:

- Jaundice (yellow color of the skin).
- Neurologic symptoms (such as stiff neck, difficulty moving the muscles of the face, reduced strength or feeling).
- New skin rash.