

Glandular fever

Glandular fever is the common name for an infection called infectious mononucleosis (IM). It had also been dubbed 'the kissing disease'. It is a common illness that particularly affects young children and late adolescents. By adulthood, the virus has infected 90% of the population.

Causes of glandular fever

It is caused by a virus called Epstein Barr virus (EBV). It spreads via saliva, quite often from kissing, or like many viruses, through tiny droplets from an infected person who is coughing. The person who spreads the virus may not themselves have symptoms.

It used to affect most young children when the illness tends to be mild or unrecognised. With better hygiene, the infection is often delayed to adolescence or adulthood when the illness is more severe. It can take four to six weeks for symptoms to appear after contracting the virus.

Symptoms and signs of infection

The common symptoms are:

- fever,
- sore throat,
- swelling of the lymph glands in the body.

The swollen lymph glands are most usually noticed in the neck: the neck can feel stiff, sore and swollen. Other glands that may swell are those in the armpits and the groin.

The tonsils are often coated with a thick white material, and the patient may find it painful on swallowing. The throat may look similar to a case of tonsillitis. For two weeks before getting the sore throat, the person may feel tired, achy and off-colour.

Other symptoms include:

- fatigue,
- chills,
- headaches,

- stomach upsets or,
- occasionally, a rash.

A less common symptom is swelling of the spleen or liver, which can occur in the second or third week. This may give the person an uncomfortable sensation or pain below the rib margins in the top part of their abdomen. Very rarely the person can be jaundiced, due to inflammation of the liver.

Symptoms in most people last from two to four weeks. Fever can sometimes continue for a month. However, some people feel off-colour, tired and have difficulty concentrating for several months afterwards.

Other complications

More severe complications are rare but may include:

- secondary bacterial infections,
- pneumonia,
- rupture of the spleen,
- hepatitis,
- iron deficiency (anaemia),
- airways obstruction,
- neurological problems (eg. viral meningitis, inflammation and weakness of muscles or nerves),
- heart problems.

Rarely, a prolonged type of illness lasting more than six months may occur. This is not the same, however, as chronic fatigue syndrome.

Other illnesses that may mimic glandular fever

A few illnesses may seem similar to glandular fever and may need additional tests to be excluded, such as: toxoplasmosis, cytomegalic virus, rubella, hepatitis, drug hypersensitivity reactions, and certain lymphatic tumours.

Treatment

As a virus causes glandular fever, antibiotics are not useful. In fact if certain antibiotics are used for this condition, a florid rash may be produced. Isolation from other people is not necessary.

The treatment is generally to treat the symptoms:

- paracetamol for headache and fever,
- aspirin gargles for the sore throat,
- plenty of fluids and rest.

Rest in the initial stages of the illness is most important. This is not the illness where you push yourself to do normal activities.

Please see your GP if you have any concerns.