Glandular fever

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is glandular fever?

Glandular fever is also known as infectious mononucleosis. It is a viral infection caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. It passes from person to person by close contact, especially kissing, and may be caught by sharing things like cups and toothbrushes. It can take up to six weeks for symptoms to show, after being infected with the virus.

Glandular fever can affect people of any age but is most common in young adults and teenagers. It is rare to have more than one episode of glandular fever; however, it is possible for pregnant women to become re-infected with glandular fever.

Symptoms

People with glandular fever may have one or more of the following symptoms for about one week. After a week the symptoms should settle down.

Sore throat – Although this may be mild, your throat is usually very sore, red and swollen. Glandular fever is suspected when your tonsillitis is severe and lasts longer than usual. Swallowing is often painful, and saliva may pool in your mouth.

Swollen glands – Swollen lymph glands are a sign that your body's immune system is fighting off the virus. You have lymph glands in various places in your body. But people with glandular fever usually experience swollen, tender neck glands.

Flu-like symptoms – Like other viral infections, glandular fever can cause a high temperature, muscle aches and headaches.

Tiredness – A feeling of intense tiredness often develops with glandular fever. This can last for more than six months after the infection.

Swelling around eyes – You may find your eyes become puffy and swollen. This goes in a short time.

Spleen – This is an organ under the ribs on the left side of the abdomen. Very occasionally, you may feel mild pain in this area.

No symptoms – Many people become infected with this virus but do not develop symptoms. This is more common in children and in those aged over 40 years.

Home care

Usually, no specific treatment is needed. However, your doctor may ask you to:

- have plenty to drink
- take simple pain relief if it is painful to swallow, have a headache or high temperature
- avoid alcohol while you are unwell.

Do I need antibiotics?

Antibiotics are not used because they don't work on the virus that causes glandular fever. If you get a secondary throat infection that responds to antibiotics, your doctor may give you an antibiotic.

Stop spreading glandular fever

While you are ill:

- avoid kissing and close body contact with other people
- avoid sharing things like cups, toothbrushes and towels.

What to expect

See a doctor if your sore throat gets worse or if it does not get better after three or four days. You should seek urgent medical attention if you develop:

- difficulty in breathing
- difficulty swallowing saliva
- difficulty opening your mouth
- severe pain, especially if the pain is mainly on one side of your throat
- a persistent high temperature
- sharp pain under the left chest, feel lightheaded or confused, have blurred vision, or faint
- if any unusual, severe or unexplained symptoms develop.