

Glandular fever

Glandular fever (or kissing disease) is the common term used to describe an acute viral infection called infectious mononucleosis. The virus that causes glandular fever is known as Epstein-Barr virus. Glandular fever mainly affects young adults. A chronic form of glandular fever is one of the suggested causes of chronic fatigue syndrome.

Fever and a sore throat

Fever and a sore throat - with exudate (deposits of fluid) around the tonsils and pharynx - are typical symptoms.

Other clinical features are:

- Enlarged lymph nodes (lymphadenopathy).
- Enlargement of the spleen (splenomegaly) - this occurs in 50 per cent of cases.
- Jaundice (yellow discolourations of the skin and eyes) - this affects four per cent of people with glandular fever.

The symptoms usually develop four to six weeks after infection with the virus. In young children, glandular fever usually causes mild symptoms or no symptoms at all.

Most people are infected with glandular fever at some time in their lives.

Spread by close contact

Glandular fever spreads through close, personal contact and is transmitted through saliva. About 50 per cent of people who are infected with the Epstein-Barr virus will develop symptoms. It is most common among high school and university students, but young children can also become infected by saliva on toys, shared cups, or the hands of carers.

Blood tests confirm the diagnosis

If you think you have glandular fever, blood tests can show whether you have the disease.

You can remain infectious for over a year

Excretion of the virus from the pharynx (throat) can occur for months, or even longer, after infection. Some healthy adults can become long term oropharyngeal carriers. ('Oropharyngeal' refers to the part of the throat that lies just past the back of the mouth.)

Excluding children from childcare is generally not advised because:

- Most people are infected by asymptomatic carriers.
- It would be impractical because the virus is excreted for many months after the initial illness.

No specific treatment

There is no specific treatment for glandular fever. You will not have to be isolated from other people. Once you have had glandular fever you will develop a high resistance to further infection. However, if your immune system is repressed, the Epstein-Barr virus may be reactivated.

You cannot be immunised against glandular fever

To prevent the spread of glandular fever:

- Ensure proper hygiene, including handwashing.
- Avoid sharing drink containers.
- Disinfect articles soiled with nose and throat discharges, for example handkerchiefs.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Public Health Division, Department of Human Services.

Things to remember

- Glandular fever ('kissing disease') is also known as infectious mononucleosis.
- The Epstein-Barr virus causes glandular fever.
- Healthy adults can become long term carriers of the virus.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by the Public Health Division of the Department of Human Services, Victoria. The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria

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