

Glandular fever

Glandular fever (also known as infectious mononucleosis) is a viral infection. It's caused by the Epstein–Barr virus (EBV), and affects mainly young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

Glandular fever is passed on by close person-to-person contact. This can include kissing, and sharing cups and toothbrushes.

Most people have been infected with EBV at some time, but many people have no symptoms. However, the virus causes glandular fever in up to half of teenagers and young adults who catch it.

It's very rare to have glandular fever more than once.



Symptoms of glandular fever

Some people don't develop any symptoms despite being infected with the virus. People with glandular fever usually have some of the following symptoms for up to 2 to 3 weeks.

- Fever and flu-like symptoms. Glandular fever often causes a high temperature, aching muscles, and headaches.
- Sore throat. Your throat can be very sore, red, and swollen. Swallowing may be painful, so you can get a lot of saliva in your mouth. Your GP is likely to suspect glandular fever if you've had a severe sore throat that lasts longer than usual.
- Swollen lymph glands. This happens because your immune system is fighting the virus. Commonly people notice swollen glands around the neck, under the jaw, but you can have swollen glands in other areas of your body as well.
- Fatigue. Glandular fever can make you feel very tired. This is often the last symptom to go away and can last for several months after the initial infection.
- Swollen, painful spleen. This is less common. Your spleen is an organ under your ribs on the left side of your tummy. As with your lymph glands, glandular fever can make it swell. Your liver can also become inflamed.

Most people get better within a few weeks, but some people can take months to fully recover.



Diagnosing glandular fever

Your GP will usually diagnose glandular fever without having to do any tests. A blood test for EBV can check for glandular fever. This is often only done if your symptoms continue, or if the diagnosis isn't clear.

Your GP may consider other causes, such as a strep throat or another viral infection.

Treating glandular fever

Glandular fever usually goes away by itself. As glandular fever is caused by a virus, antibiotics won't be effective.

You can help yourself by:

- avoiding strenuous activities, exercise, and ensure you get lots of sleep
- taking pain relief, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen to ease pain, headache, and fever
- making sure you drink plenty of fluids to keep well hydrated
- avoiding alcohol, as glandular fever can also affect your liver, and drinking alcohol can make you feel worse.

Preventing the spread of glandular fever

EBV is spread by close contact with the saliva or nasal (nose) secretions of infected people. This can happen by touching hands, toys, eating utensils, drink bottles, or by kissing.

People can be infectious for up to seven weeks before they get symptoms, and for many months after their symptoms go away. It's important to avoid close contact with anyone who has, or has recently had, glandular fever. Try not to kiss, share cups, cutlery or towels with other people.

Good hand hygiene prevents the virus spreading. Make sure you thoroughly wash your hands regularly.

Complications of glandular fever

Most people with glandular fever don't have complications. But if they do, they may include:

- A red, but not itchy, rash covering a lot of your body. This usually goes away quite quickly.
- Yellow skin (jaundice). This can happen if you get an inflamed liver, but it isn't serious and usually goes away quickly.
- Feeling tired, ill, and unhappy. It's common to feel tired and low when you have glandular fever. Some people develop post-viral fatigue, but this usually goes away in time.
- A damaged spleen. This is very rare, but serious. It usually happens during contact sports if the spleen is enlarged. It's best to avoid contact sports and vigorous exercise for four-to-six weeks after having glandular fever.

You only need to be off school or work if your symptoms are making you feel too unwell. People who have had glandular fever can return to work, university, or school as soon as they feel well



enough. You may need to start with a few hours at a time, and gradually ease back in, to make sure you don't get too tired.

Written by Medical Liaison Manager, Southern Community Laboratories. Adapted by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed December 2018.

Sources

The information in this section comes from the following sources, some of which may be clinically complex or not available to the general public.

HealthPathways – Infectious mononucleosis, retrieved November 2018.

Patient.info – Glandular Fever, retrieved November 2018.