

# Health Office Fact Sheet



## Glandular Fever

### What is Glandular fever?

Glandular fever (also known as infectious mononucleosis) is a type of viral infection that can cause fever, sore throat, swollen lymph nodes (glands) and fatigue. Most cases of glandular fever are caused by the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV).

### Who gets Glandular fever?

EBV is one of the most common viruses that can affect humans. It's estimated that 90% of all adults are infected with EBV.

Most EBV infections take place during early childhood and usually produce few or no symptoms. Once an EBV infection has occurred, the virus will remain in the body for life, lying dormant in a number of throat and blood cells.

However, if an EBV infection occurs during the teenage years, or early adulthood, there is a risk that it will lead to the development of glandular fever.

Therefore, the majority of glandular fever cases occur in teenagers and young people aged between 15 and 25, but the condition can affect people of any age.

### How do you get Glandular fever?

You can catch glandular fever by coming into contact with the saliva of someone who is currently infected with the condition. Therefore, glandular fever can be spread through:

- kissing (it is often referred to as the kissing disease),
- exposure to coughs and sneezes, and
- sharing eating and drinking utensils, such as cups, glasses or unwashed forks and spoons.

You'll be contagious for at least two months after initial infection with EBV. Some people can have EBV in their saliva for up to 18 months after infection.

Once you've been exposed to glandular fever, it's highly unlikely that you'll develop a second bout of the infection. This is because almost everyone develops a life-long immunity to glandular fever after the initial infection.

### What are the symptoms of Glandular fever, when do they appear and how long do they last?

The symptoms of glandular fever usually begin between four and seven weeks after a person contracts the initial infection, although symptoms may appear earlier in younger children.

Symptoms of glandular fever include:

- sore throat
- fever with a temperature of, or above, 37.5°C (99.5°F)
- swollen lymph nodes, particularly the glands in the neck or the armpit
- fatigue
- weakness
- swollen tonsils
- headache
- loss of appetite

- swollen spleen
- skin rash.

The symptoms of a sore throat and fever should improve over the course of two weeks. Symptoms of fatigue and swollen lymph nodes may persist for longer, and can occasionally last for several months.

### **The liver**

In some cases of glandular fever the infection can affect the liver. This can cause jaundice, leading to yellowing of the skin and the eyes. Symptoms of jaundice are more common in people who are over 30 years of age.

Many people with glandular fever will also experience mild inflammation of the liver (hepatitis). Mild liver inflammation can cause symptoms such as:

- nausea,
- loss of appetite

The symptoms of jaundice and hepatitis should pass once you recover from glandular fever.

### **What is the treatment for Glandular fever?**

There is currently no cure for glandular fever, but there are a number of self-care techniques that you can use to help control symptoms.

#### **Rest**

It is important to take plenty of rest for the first four weeks after your symptoms of glandular fever begin because this will help to speed up your recovery time. It is unlikely that you will be able to carry out your usually daily activities, such as attending school, college or work, until your symptoms improve.

Once your energy level begins to return to normal, you should begin a programme of gradual exercise in order to rebuild your strength. Your GP should be able to advise you about the types of exercise and activity that are suitable.

#### **Fluids**

It is important to drink plenty of water, or unsweetened fruit juices, as this will help to relieve symptoms of fever and sore throat while preventing you from becoming dehydrated.

#### **Over-the-counter painkillers**

Over-the-counter (OTC) painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, can also help to relieve symptoms of pain and fever.

Children who are under 16 years of age should not take aspirin because there is a small risk that it could trigger an uncommon but extremely serious health condition called Reye's syndrome that affects the liver and the brain.

#### **Antibiotics and steroids**

Antibiotics are not effective in treating glandular fever because they have no effect on viral infection. However, they may be used if you develop a secondary bacterial infection of the throat.

You may also be prescribed a short course of steroids if you experience particularly severe swelling of your tonsils.

## Are there any complications?

### Ruptured spleen

Most people who develop glandular fever will experience swelling of the spleen. A swollen spleen does not present any immediate health problems, but it does increase the risk of it being ruptured (splitting).

The main symptom of a ruptured spleen is the sudden development of a sharp abdominal pain.

**If you experience a sudden abdominal pain, and you have glandular fever, you should dial 999 to request an ambulance. If you have a ruptured spleen, emergency surgery will be required to repair it.**

The risk of rupturing the spleen is small. It occurs in only one in every 1,000 cases. A ruptured spleen can be life-threatening because it causes severe internal bleeding.

A ruptured spleen usually occurs as a result of damage caused by vigorous physical activities, such as contact sports. It is therefore important that you avoid these activities for at least a month after the symptoms of glandular fever begin.

You should be particularly careful during the second and third week of your illness, when the spleen is most vulnerable.

Your GP will be able to advise you about when it is safe to resume vigorous physical activities.

### Secondary infection

In a small number of glandular fever cases, the initial infection spreads to other parts of the body, leading to a more serious secondary infection.

Possible secondary infections that may arise from glandular fever include:

- pneumonia (infection of the lung),
- meningitis (infection of the membranes of the brain and spinal cord), and
- inflammation of the heart.

Secondary infections usually only occur in people who have a weakened immune system (immune-compromised), for example those with underlying medical conditions or those undergoing high-dose chemotherapy.

If you have a weakened immune system and you develop glandular fever, you may be referred to hospital for specialist treatment as a precaution, so that your health can be carefully monitored and any secondary infection can be treated.

### Prolonged fatigue

An estimated 10% of people with glandular fever will experience prolonged fatigue that lasts for six months or more after the initial infection.

It has been suggested that this may be a form of chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), which is a poorly understood condition that causes fatigue and flu-like symptoms such as headache and joint pain.

It is not known why some people experience prolonged fatigue after having glandular fever. Recent research carried out in Australia seems to suggest that particularly severe glandular fever infections may affect the nervous system at the genetic level, leading to prolonged fatigue. However, further research is required to explore this issue more fully.

From the evidence available, it seems that adopting a gradual exercise plan in order to rebuild your strength and energy levels is the best way to prevent prolonged fatigue

## Should you stay away from work/school & preventing the spread of infection?

If you develop glandular fever you should avoid kissing and sharing eating and drinking utensils for at least two months after your symptoms begin. It is also important to wash your hands regularly, particularly after coughing or sneezing.

However, there is no need for a person with glandular fever to be isolated from others because most people will already be immune to the Epstein-Barr virus.

[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk),

[www.kidhealth.com](http://www.kidhealth.com)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

