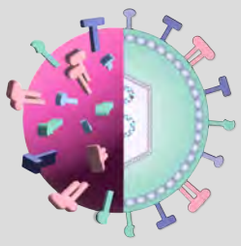
Mono Unmasked

What You Should Know About "The Kissing Disease"

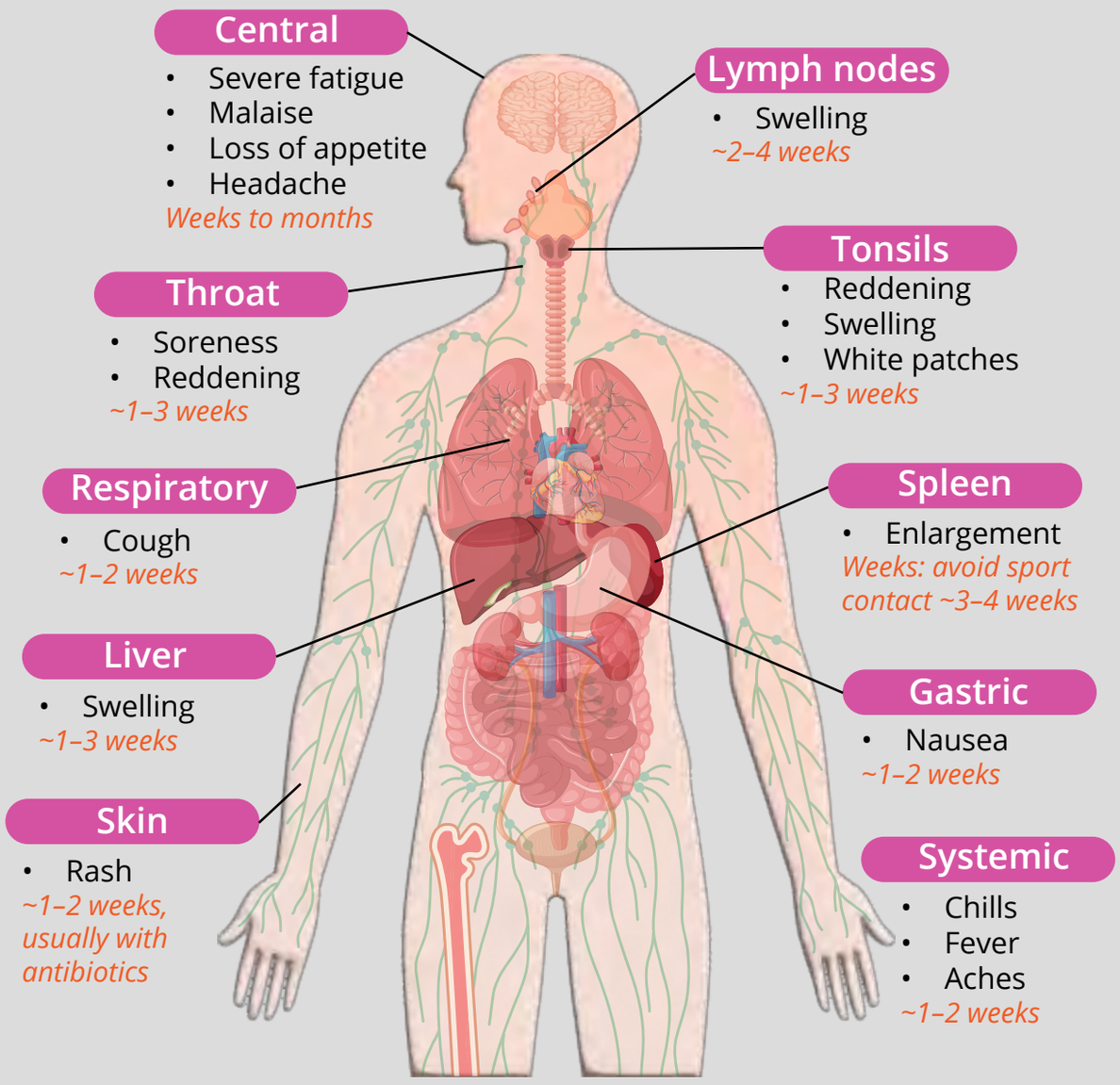
What is mono?



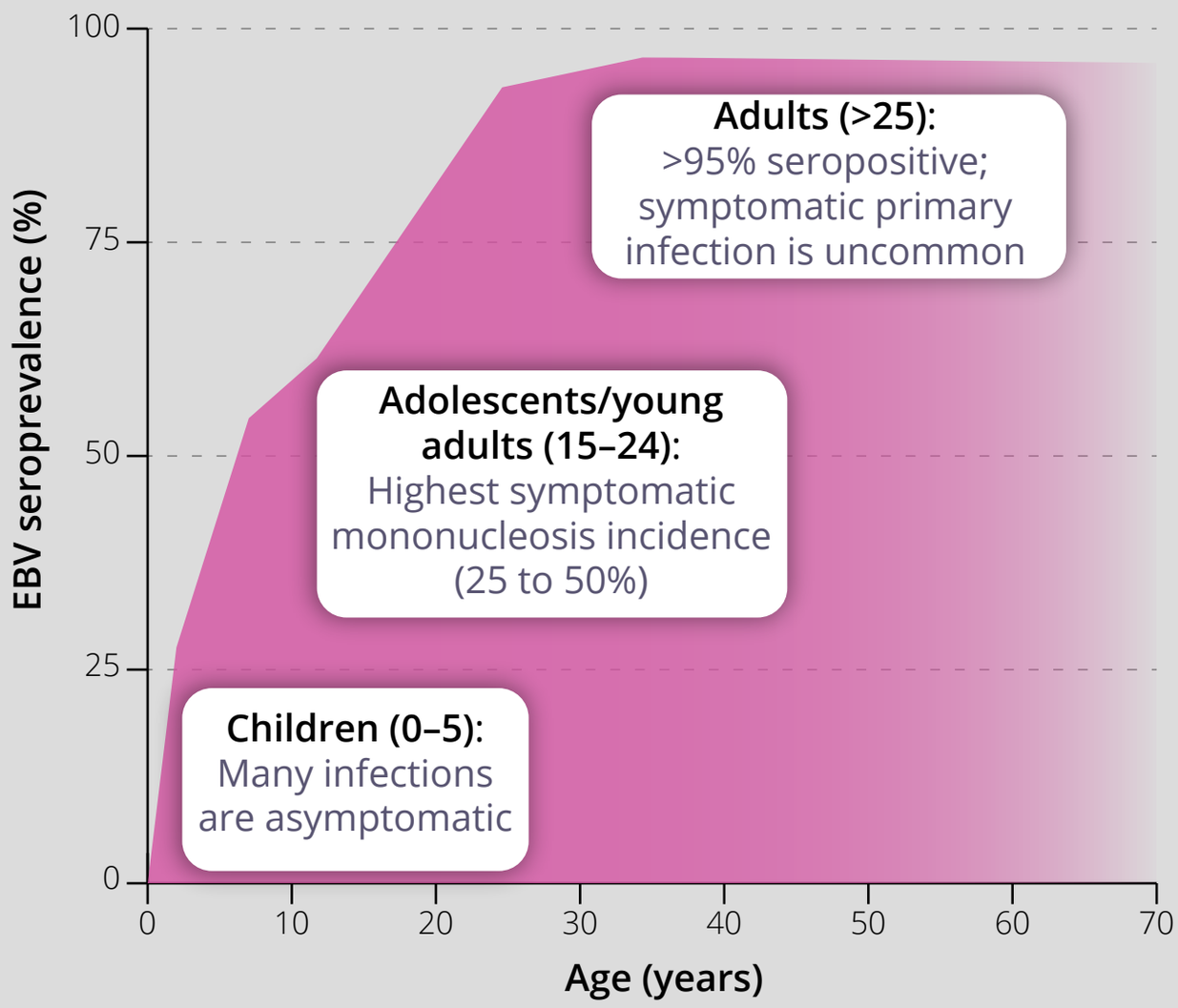
Epstein-Barr virus (EBV or human herpesvirus 4) is one of the most common human viruses globally.

Most EBV infections are asymptomatic, but a primary infection in adolescence or young adulthood can cause infectious mononucleosis.

Infectious mononucleosis: symptoms and duration



Who gets it?



How does it spread?

EBV spreads mainly through saliva (kissing, sharing utensils/drinks); EBV can be shed intermittently in saliva for months to years after infection.



Diagnosis & treatment

Diagnosis: clinical signs + monospot test or EBV-specific serology (VCA-IgM, VCA-IgG, EBNA).





Treatment: supportive care (rest, fluids, analgesics). Corticosteroids are used only for severe complications. Antibiotics are not effective, and ampicillin or amoxicillin may cause a rash.

Outcomes & prevention

Outcomes: most recover fully; serious complications (splenic rupture, airway obstruction, neurologic complications) are rare (<1% splenic rupture among symptomatic cases).

Prevention: No vaccine yet. Avoid exchange of saliva while symptomatic.

VACCINE IN DEVELOPMENT



Do not kiss a person with mono.

Do not share food and drinks.

Do not share items, like lip balms and toothbrushes.



Abbreviations

EBNA, Epstein-Barr Virus Nuclear Antigen; **EBV**, Epstein-Barr virus; **Ig**, immunoglobulin; **VCA**, Viral Capsid Antigen

References

(1) Andrei G, et al. Novel Therapeutics for Epstein(-)Barr Virus. Molecules. 2019;24(5). (2) CDC. Epstein-Barr Virus and Infectious Mononucleosis 2024 [Available from: https://www.cdc.gov/epstein-barr/about/index.html. (3) Kuri A, et al. Epidemiology of Epstein-Barr virus infection and infectious mononucleosis in the United Kingdom. BMC Public Health. 2020;20(1):912. (4) Muckian MD, et al. Equity in protection: bridging global data gaps for an EBV vaccine-a systematic review and meta-analysis. BMJ Glob Health. 2025;10(8). (5) Rostgaard K, et al. Primary Epstein-Barr virus infection with and without infectious mononucleosis. PLoS One. 2019;14(12):e0226436.

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