
Alice-

My roommate infected me with some kind of virus that he had (actually still has it) and I got over it in one day. He, on the other hand, went out with his friends, drank insanely, stayed out all night, and consequently got sicker and sicker. Now, he's left for a few days to recover at home. I was wondering, since he got so sick (he was ill for over eight days, was coughing, vomiting, etc.), is it possible that he may have contracted mono, or even pneumonia? And if it is, should I be concerned for myself?

Signed,
Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Although there is no way to diagnose your friend's illness online, his symptoms do not appear to match mono. Still, it sounds as though he may need a trip to see a health care provider for a proper diagnosis and treatment.

Here’s a little more about the infections you bring up: mononucleosis (or mono) is caused by the Epstein-Barr virus. In developed countries, where individuals are usually not exposed as children, the peak years for mono infection are fourteen to eighteen. Most people with mono don't know where or from whom they got it. Although it used to be called the "kissing disease," mono is probably spread by close contact (not necessarily sexual) with an infected person, with symptoms appearing approximately three weeks after contact.

Symptoms of mono include severe sore throat with a painful swelling of lymph nodes in the neck, lethargy, a fever, and, occasionally, a rash. An enlarged spleen (on the left side in your abdomen) may also develop and can be dangerous. Antibiotics do not cure mono, because it is a viral infection (antibiotics only work on bacterial infections). Generally, the treatment plan for mono is plenty of sleep and fluids. Infected people may be troubled by fatigue for weeks, or even for several months. However, mono does not necessarily deserve its reputation as a prolonged illness. Most people get better quickly, often within two weeks, and some people have such a mild case that they are hardly sick at all.

Pneumonia, on the other hand, can be a viral, bacterial, or even fungal infection that causes fever, shortness of breath, a persistent cough, and chest pains. Pneumonia is hard to catch
from another person unless s/he coughs on you a lot. When someone is sick for several days, as in the case of your roommate, it is a good idea to visit a health care provider, who can test for different types of infections, some of which can be serious.

You were perceptive in noticing the dramatic difference between the two courses of illness (yours and your friend's). You and your roommate could have had the same infection or you could have had different infections. Immune response can definitely be influenced by overall health and behaviors. Research has shown that the number of T-cells (cells that carry out immune response) rises and falls inversely with stress. Stress ranges from emotional stressors, such as anger, anxiety, depression, and grief, to physical stressors, such as poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, overexertion, smoking, drinking, and other drug use. Your experience, combined with research, makes it clear that if one starts to feel a bit sick, s/he is better off taking it easy right from the beginning, instead of pushing through and risking a recurring, or prolonged, illness.

If you continue to feel okay, you probably don't have much to worry about? even when your roommate returns. Try to stay healthy by managing your stress, eating well, and washing your hands frequently, to name a few key strategies.

Alice!
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