

# RESPIRATORY SYNCYTIAL VIRUS (RSV)

## *What You Need to Know*

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### **What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?**

Respiratory Syncytial Virus, or RSV, is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms.

### **Who can get RSV?**

People of any age can get RSV infection. However, some people are more likely to develop severe RSV infection and may need to be hospitalized:

- Babies 12 months and younger (especially if they were born premature)
- Older adults
- People with heart and/or lung disease
- People with a weak immune system (immunocompromised)

RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small airways in the lung) and pneumonia (infection of the lungs) in children younger than 1 year of age in the United States.

### **What are the symptoms of RSV?**

Symptoms usually begin 4-6 days after exposure. In healthy adults and older children, RSV symptoms are mild and typically mimic the common cold. In severe cases, symptoms may include fever, severe cough, wheezing, rapid breathing or difficulty breathing, and bluish color of the skin due to lack of oxygen (cyanosis).

Infants are most severely affected by RSV. Signs and symptoms of severe RSV infection in infants include:

- Short, shallow, and rapid breathing
- Struggling to breathe — chest muscles and skin pull inward with each breath (retracting)
- Cough
- Poor feeding
- Unusual tiredness (lethargy)
- Irritability

Seek immediate medical attention if a child — or anyone at risk of severe RSV infection — has difficulty breathing, a high fever, or a blue color to the skin, particularly on the lips and in the nail beds.

### **How is RSV spread?**

RSV is spread from person to person by droplets from the nose, throat and mouth through sneezing, coughing, and speaking. Infection can also occur from direct contact with nasal or oral secretions through kissing the face of a child with RSV. Sometimes people become infected by touching an object with the virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

### **How is RSV treated?**

Most RSV infections go away on their own in a week or two and are managed at home with over-the-counter fever reducers and pain relievers, such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen (talk to a healthcare provider before giving a

child nonprescription cold medicines, as some medicines contain ingredients that are not good for children). It is important for people with RSV infection to drink enough fluids to prevent dehydration (loss of body fluids).

People with severe RSV infections may require hospitalization if they are having trouble breathing or are dehydrated. In most of these cases, hospitalization only lasts a few days.

## How can RSV be prevented?

- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your upper shirt sleeve, not your hands
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- Avoid close contact, such as kissing, shaking hands, and sharing cups and eating utensils, with others
- Clean frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs and mobile devices
- Stay home and avoid others when sick

Parents of children at high risk for developing severe RSV disease, consider the following for your child when possible:

- Avoid close contact with sick people
- Wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- Avoid touching their face with unwashed hands
- Researchers are working to develop RSV vaccines, but none are available yet. However, a drug called palivizumab is available to prevent severe RSV illness in certain infants and children who are at high risk for severe disease (infants born prematurely or with congenital heart disease or chronic lung disease).

## Hand washing instructions:

- Use soap and running water
- Rub your hands vigorously for 20 seconds
- Wash all surfaces, including:
  - backs of hands
  - wrists
  - between fingers
  - under fingernails
- Rinse well
- Dry hands with a paper towel
- Turn off the water using a paper towel instead of bare hands
- Wash your hands often and help children to do the same

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