

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)



Frequently Asked Questions

What are the symptoms of RSV?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms such as:

- Runny nose
- Decrease in appetite
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Wheezing

People infected with RSV usually show symptoms within 4 to 6 days after getting infected. Symptoms usually appear in stages and not all at once. In very young infants with RSV, the only symptoms may be irritability, decreased activity, and breathing difficulties.

Who gets RSV?

Virtually all children get an RSV infection by the time they are 2 years old. However, anyone can get an RSV infection at any age and you can become infected more than once in your lifetime. Infants, young children, and older adults are more likely to get serious complications if they get sick with RSV.

How is RSV spread?

Children are often exposed to and infected with RSV outside the home, such as in school or childcare centers. They can then transmit the virus to other members of the family.

RSV can spread when:

- An infected person coughs or sneezes
- You get virus droplets from a cough or sneeze in your eyes, nose, or mouth
- You have direct contact with the virus, such as kissing the face of a child with RSV
- You touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your face before washing your hands

RSV can survive for many hours on hard surfaces such as tables and crib rails. It typically lives on soft surfaces such as tissues and hands for shorter amounts of time. People infected with RSV are usually contagious for 3 to 8 days and may become contagious a day or two before showing signs of illness. However, some infants, and people with weakened immune systems, can continue to spread the virus even after they stop showing symptoms (for as long as 4 weeks).

Who is at risk for serious illness?

People at greatest risk for severe illness from RSV include:

- Premature infants
- Infants (especially those 6 months and younger)
- Children younger than 2 years old with chronic lung disease or congenital (present from birth) heart disease
- Children with weakened immune systems
- Children who have neuromuscular disorders, including those who have difficulty swallowing or clearing mucus secretions

Adults at highest risk for severe RSV infection include:

- Older adults (especially those 65 years and older)
- Adults with chronic heart or lung disease
- Adults with weakened immune systems

How is RSV diagnosed?

A healthcare provider may suspect RSV based on medical history, time of year, and a physical exam. A mouth swab or blood test to check white blood cell counts and look for viruses may be performed. In severe RSV cases that require hospitalization, additional testing may be needed.

What is the treatment for RSV?

Most RSV infections go away on their own in a week or two. There is no specific treatment, but researchers are working to develop vaccines and antivirals (medicines that fight viruses). Antibiotics will not cure RSV infections because antibiotics only kill bacteria, not viruses.

What can be done to prevent RSV infections?

You can protect yourself and others from RSV, and other respiratory illnesses, by following a few simple steps:

- Wash hands often
- Keep hands off your face
- Avoid close contact with sick people
- Cover coughs and sneezes
- Clean and disinfect surfaces
- Stay home when sick

Where can I get more information?

- Your healthcare provider
- The NJ Department of Health <http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/index.html>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention