

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Fact Sheet

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What is RSV?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus, or RSV, is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms. Anyone can get an RSV infection, but infections in adults is usually less severe. It commonly occurs in children aged two and under with children often exposed outside of the home such as a childcare centre or school. Once acquired they can then transmit the infection to other family members.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually include:

- Congested or runny nose
- Low-grade fever
- Sneezing
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Headache

These symptoms usually develop within 4 to 6 days after being infected with the virus. The symptoms can appear in stages and not all at once. Infants with RSV may not show any symptoms other than irritability and listlessness. Most people recover in a week to ten days and do not need to be hospitalised.

RSV can spread to the lower respiratory tract and can cause more serious infections such as bronchiolitis, an inflammation of the small airways in the lung, and pneumonia, an infection of the lungs. It can also make chronic health conditions worse.

Severe symptoms may include:

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

There are some people who are more likely to develop a severe RSV infection and may need to be hospitalised. Those at a higher risk for a severe infection include:

- Premature infants
- Young children with congenital (from birth) heart or chronic lung disease
- Young children with compromised (weakened) immune systems due to a medical condition or medical treatment
- Adults with compromised immune systems
- Older adults, especially those with underlying heart or lung disease

If adults or children develop concerning symptoms, such as rapid breathing, difficulty breathing, chest pain, severe vomiting, or if a child is not responding or is difficult to wake up, they should seek medical attention immediately – including calling 111 for an ambulance if it is an emergency.

Many of the symptoms are similar to those of COVID-19. COVID-19 testing is important for any adult with these symptoms. Unlike teenagers and adults, children 11 years and under with these symptoms don't always need to be tested for COVID-19.

If a child has been in contact with a COVID-19 case, returned from a place where there is COVID-19, or left managed isolation in the last 14 days, the parents are advised to ring Healthline (0800 611 116) for advice on testing.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for most cases. It is important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Fevers and pain can be managed with over-the-counter fever reducers and pain relievers. Talk to your doctor before giving your child non-prescription cold medicines as they may contain some ingredients that are not suitable for children. If symptoms persist consult a doctor.

How is it spread?

RSV can be spread when:

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

How do you prevent the spread to others?

People infected with RSV are usually contagious for 3 to 8 days with symptoms typically lasting about a week. However, some infants, and people with weakened immune systems, may have symptoms for longer and can continue to spread the virus even after they stop showing symptoms, for as long as 4 weeks.

The risk of spreading RSV to others is greatly reduced if you:

- **Wash your hands frequently.** Teach your children the importance of handwashing.
- **Avoid exposure.** Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Limit your contact with people who have fevers or colds.
- **Keep things clean.** Make sure kitchen and bathroom benchtops, doorknobs, and handles are clean. Discard used tissues right away.
- **Don't share drinking glasses with others.** Use your own glass or disposable cups when you or someone else is sick. Label each person's cup.
- **Don't smoke.** Babies who are exposed to tobacco smoke have a higher risk of getting RSV and potentially more-severe symptoms. If you do smoke, don't smoke inside the house or car.
- **Wash toys regularly.** Do this especially when your child or a playmate is sick.

When can I return to day care, school or work?

Anyone who is sick should stay at home until 24 hours after symptoms have stopped and they are well.

For further information, contact a Health Protection Officer (contact details are listed) or your local Public Health Nurse.