

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

updated August 2023

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?

Respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms. Most people recover in a week or two, but RSV can be serious. Infants and older adults are more likely to develop severe RSV and need hospitalization.

In most regions of the U.S. and other areas with similar climates, RSV season generally starts during fall and peaks in the winter. The timing and severity of RSV season in a given community can vary from year to year.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

People infected with RSV usually show symptoms within 4 to 6 days after getting infected. Symptoms of RSV infection usually include

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

These 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.

Almost all children will have had an RSV infection by their second birthday.

Is RSV serious?

RSV and Adults: In the U.S., RSV causes seasonal epidemics of respiratory illness. Each season, RSV causes substantial morbidity and mortality in older adults, including lower respiratory tract disease, hospitalization and death. Most adult RSV disease cases occur among older adults:

- An estimated 60,000 – 160,000 hospitalizations, and
- 6,000–10,000 deaths annually among adults aged ≥65 years.

RSV and Children: RSV is one of the most common causes of childhood respiratory illness and results in annual outbreaks of respiratory illnesses in all age groups. It is the leading cause of hospitalizations for infants and older babies.

- An estimated 58,000 to 80,000 children under 5 years of age, most of them infants, are hospitalized each year nationwide due to RSV infection.

- Each year, an estimated 100 to 300 children younger than 5 years of age die due to RSV.

How does RSV spread?

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, like kissing the face of a child with RSV
- You touch a surface that has the virus on it, like a doorknob, and then touch your face before washing your hands

People infected with RSV are usually contagious for 3 to 8 days and may become contagious a day or two before they start 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.

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.

People are typically infected with RSV for the first time as an infant or toddler. However, repeat infections may occur throughout life, and people of any age can be infected.

How is RSV treated?

Treatment for RSV generally involves self-care measures at home such as drinking plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. However, hospital care may be needed if severe symptoms occur.

- Over-the-counter medication such as acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) can reduce fever.
- Use of nasal saline drops and suctioning may help clear a stuffy nose.
- Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics if there's a bacterial complication, such as bacterial pneumonia.

If the RSV infection is severe, a hospital stay may be necessary. These treatments may include:

- Intravenous (IV) fluids
- Humidified oxygen
- A breathing machine (mechanical ventilation), in rare cases
- An inhaler (bronchodilator) or steroids are not proved to be helpful in treating RSV infection.

Is there a vaccine for RSV?

Vaccines are available to protect older adults from severe RSV. Monoclonal antibody products will be available, starting fall 2023, to protect infants and young children from severe RSV.

RSV Vaccine for Older Adults: RSV vaccine helps protect adults 60 years and older from RSV disease. Older adults are at greater risk than young adults for serious complications from RSV because immune systems weaken with age.

- CDC recommends patients discuss the use of a single dose of recently approved vaccines by GSK and Pfizer for respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) with their healthcare provider.
- For both the GSK and Pfizer vaccines, a single RSV dose demonstrated efficacy in preventing symptomatic RSV-associated LRTD among adults aged ≥ 60 years.

RSV Protection for Infants and Young Children: Nirsevimab, trade name BeyfortusTM, is a long-acting monoclonal antibody product, which has been shown to reduce the risk of both hospitalizations and healthcare visits for RSV in infants by about 80 percent.

- CDC recommends one dose of nirsevimab for all infants younger than 8 months, born during – or entering – their first RSV season (typically fall through spring).
- CDC recommends a second dose in the following RSV season for children between the ages of 8 and 19 months who are at increased risk of severe RSV disease, such as children who are severely immunocompromised.

How can I prevent getting RSV?

You can take steps to prevent the spread of RSV:

- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your shirt sleeve, not your hands
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- Avoid close contact with others
- Clean frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs and mobile devices

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, a community pharmacist or your local public health unit.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/index.html>

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have questions about the disease described above or think that you may have this infection, consult a health care provider.

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