

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 are usually less severe. It commonly occurs in children aged two and under, with children often exposed outside of the home at a childcare centre or school. Once infected, children can then transmit the infection to other family members. While normally a mild illness that can be managed at home, 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).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms are often like a typical cold. They can appear in stages and not all at once. They usually include:

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

Most people recover in a week to ten days and do not need to be hospitalised, although some children may continue to cough for several weeks.

Some people may show more severe symptoms, particularly if they are very young, were born prematurely, or have heart, lung, or immune system conditions.

Severe symptoms may include:

- Faster breathing than normal
- Severe cough
- Poor feeding in children
- Irritability
- Unusual tiredness (lethargy)
- Infants may not show any symptoms other than reduced feeding, irritability, and lethargy.

If your child is displaying severe symptoms, you should see your family doctor urgently, or go to your after-hours medical centre urgently.

If adults or children develop very severe symptoms, call 111 or go to A+E immediately.

Very severe symptoms include:

- difficulty breathing – for children you may notice grunting noises or their tummy sucking under their ribs
- there are pauses during breathing
- the skin, tongue or lips are blue
- your child is floppy or will not wake up or stay awake.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for most cases. 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. Encourage everyone to drink enough to prevent them becoming dehydrated. If symptoms persist, consult a doctor.

Please note, RSV is typically only tested for when someone has been admitted to hospital with a severe respiratory infection.

Many of the symptoms of an RSV infection are like those of COVID-19 and children 11 years and under with these symptoms don't always need to be tested for this. If a child has been in contact with a COVID-19 case, parents are advised to ring Healthline (0800 611 116) for advice on testing.

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 children have a cough for several 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 or has a fever should stay at home until 24 hours after symptoms have stopped and they are well. Anyone who has recovered (generally feeling well, have **no fever**) but has a lingering cough can return to normal activities.

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