

FACT SHEET: RSV

September 2023

WHAT IS RSV?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a viral infection that can affect both the upper and lower respiratory tract. It is the most serious lower respiratory tract infections in infants and young children. Reinfection occurs throughout life, with the disease generally limited to the upper respiratory tract in people older than 3 years.

WHO GETS RSV?

This is such a common virus that almost all children in the United States have been infected with RSV by the age of three. It is the most frequent cause of lower respiratory infections, including pneumonia and bronchiolitis, in infants and children less than two years of age. Almost all children in child-care settings get RSV in the first year of their life. Most cases of RSV occur between the months of October to April. It can be particularly serious in pre-term infants. RSV causes repeated infections throughout life, usually associated with moderate to severe cold-like symptoms. Severe lower respiratory tract infections may occur at any age, especially among the elderly or among those with compromised cardiac, pulmonary, or immune systems.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF RSV?

In most children, the symptoms of RSV appear similar to a mild cold with fever, runny nose, congestion, decreased appetite, and cough. This may be accompanied by wheezing. The symptoms of pneumonia may develop including difficulty in breathing. Otitis media, or ear infection, may also develop. Symptoms typically occur 2–8 days after exposure to an infected people.

HOW IS RSV SPREAD?

RSV is spread from person to person through the respiratory secretions of an infected person. This most frequently occurs by touching a surface or object that is contaminated with infected secretions and then touching your mouth or nose before washing your hands. It can also be spread from respiratory secretions through close contact with the infected person.

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

Symptoms usually occur one to ten days after being infected with the virus.

IS A PERSON WITH RSV CONTAGIOUS?

Yes, a person with RSV is contagious during the length of the illness. A young child may be infectious for one to three weeks after the illness subsides.

HOW IS RSV TREATED?

Treatment for RSV depends on the severity of the illness. For children with mild illness, no specific treatment is necessary other than treatment of symptoms. Children with severe illness require hospitalization and may require oxygen therapy or even the use of a breathing machine (ventilator). Since this is a viral infection, antibiotics are not indicated. Children who are very ill should not be treated with aspirin for a fever due to an associated risk of Reye Syndrome.

SHOULD A PERSON WITH RSV BE EXCLUDED FROM WORK OR SCHOOL?

No, a person with RSV does not need to be excluded from work or school as long as they feel well enough to participate in their usual activities.

HOW CAN RSV BE PREVENTED?

The most effective way to prevent RSV and other respiratory viral infections is thorough and frequent hand washing. In a child-care center the following can be done to help prevent the spread of RSV:

- Frequent hand-washing with soap and running water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Appropriate disposal of facial tissues used to clean nasal secretions.
- Cleaning of toys between use by each child
- Wash doorknobs and telephones frequently with a sanitizing solution or wipe.
- Avoid sharing cups, glasses and eating utensils.
- All children may be grouped together and kept separate from well or recovered children.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

Information about RSV and other related health topics can be found at [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.