

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

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RSV is a common respiratory infection which mostly affects young children but can also occur in adults. Although RSV symptoms are usually mild, some children and adults can get very sick and need hospital treatment. There is currently no vaccine for RSV approved for use in Australia.

What is respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)?

Respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, is a virus that causes respiratory infections. It mostly affects young children but can also occur in adults. Infections are usually highest in late autumn or winter in NSW.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

For most people, RSV infection causes a mild respiratory illness. Symptoms usually begin around 2 to 8 days after exposure to the virus.

Symptoms can include:

- runny nose
- cough
- wheeze
- difficulty breathing
- fever
- cyanosis (bluish or greyish colour of the skin).

Babies under one year of age are more likely to develop breathing problems such as bronchiolitis or pneumonia. They can be unsettled and have difficulty feeding.

How is RSV spread?

RSV is **highly infectious**. It can be spread through:

- large aerosol droplets made when someone coughs or sneezes
- touching a surface or object that virus droplets have landed on from an infected person.

A person is usually infectious while they have symptoms.

Who is at higher risk of severe RSV?

RSV can affect anyone and usually causes a mild infection. Babies are at higher risk of severe illness and may need admission to hospital to help their breathing and hydration, especially if they have lung, heart or immune problems or were born prematurely.

Children with viral wheeze or asthma may have symptoms triggered by RSV. Older adults, especially those with chronic heart or lung disease or weakened immune systems may also become unwell with RSV.

How is RSV prevented?

There are currently no vaccines available for RSV in Australia.

The best way to help stop the virus spreading is for everyone to maintain good hygiene, especially if you have respiratory symptoms. If you have RSV and have symptoms, you should:

- stay at home
- cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- wear a mask where possible in crowded places
- avoid high risk settings (such as hospitals or aged care facilities) or contact with people at higher risk of severe illness such as infants, older people and those who are immunocompromised until you feel better.

The virus can survive on surfaces or objects for several hours. It is therefore important to:

- wash your hands regularly with soap and warm water or use hand sanitiser
- avoid sharing cups and utensils.

Parents and carers can also take steps to help prevent RSV, such as:

- keep sick children at home until they are better
- regularly clean surfaces and objects such as toys using a household detergent, especially if they have been sneezed upon or mouthed.

How is RSV diagnosed?

RSV can be identified by a nose or throat swab (PCR test). Some doctors can diagnose RSV based on signs and symptoms.

How is RSV managed?

Most people's immune system will fight off the infection. RSV infections are usually mild and can be managed with:

- rest
- paracetamol and ibuprofen to relieve pain
- regular sips of water or frequent feeds for babies to stay hydrated.

Continue to take any medications you have been prescribed as usual. If you are unsure about your current medication or treatment, or have any concerns about your health, call your doctor.

Some people may need to be hospitalised for treatment if their symptoms are severe.

Monitoring RSV symptoms in young children

RSV can cause a chest infection called bronchiolitis. Babies and children with bronchiolitis can usually be managed at home. Visit the [Sydney Children's Hospitals Network website](#) for bronchiolitis information.

Call healthdirect on 1800 022 222 for free 24-hour health advice or **make an appointment for your child to see a doctor if:**

- they have a cough that is getting worse
- they have less than half their normal feeds or are refusing food or drinks
- they seem very tired or are more sleepy than usual
- you are worried in any way.

Call Triple Zero (000) or go to your local emergency department if your child:

- has difficulty breathing (very fast or irregular breaths) or drawing in of the chest with each breath
- cannot feed normally because of coughing or wheezing
- is changing colour in the face when they cough
- has skin that is pale and sweaty.

What is the public health response to RSV?

RSV must be notified by laboratories in NSW. Trends in RSV notification are reported in the [NSW respiratory surveillance reports](#), along with surveillance data on young children with bronchiolitis presenting to emergency departments.

Further information

For further information speak to your doctor or call healthdirect on 1800 022 222 for free 24-hour health advice.