
Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

What is it?

RSV is a virus that can cause acute respiratory tract illness in people of all ages. Most people have been infected with this virus within the first few years of life. Immunity, however, is not complete and re-infection is common. This infection usually occurs in late winter and early spring.

What are the symptoms?

Although RSV infections may look like the common cold, they tend to be more severe and last longer. Bronchitis, pneumonia and influenza-like illness are often the signs of RSV in infants and the elderly. Other symptoms are fever, conjunctivitis, earache, nasal congestion and cough.

Who is at risk?

People of all ages are at risk. RSV is the major cause of lower respiratory tract illness in young children. For elderly people and in those with other medical conditions, RSV infections can involve both the upper and lower respiratory tracts and may be severe. Pneumonia can develop in five to 50 per cent of elderly cases and can lead to death in up to 20 per cent of these cases.

When do symptoms start?

It takes two to eight days or most commonly four to six days, after coming in contact with the infection.

When is it contagious?

The infection can be spread for seven to 14 days after symptoms appear, but may last longer in young infants where viral shedding may continue for three to four weeks.

How does it spread?

RSV is spread through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of infected people when they cough and sneeze. It can also be spread through dried droplets on objects as the virus can live on surfaces for many hours and for a half-hour or more on unwashed hands. RSV is not spread through the air.

How is it treated?

Most cases of RSV do not need any treatment and you will get better on your own. For severe cases oxygen therapy and or an antiviral medication may be prescribed.

How can the spread of RSV be reduced?

- Good hand washing is very important.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing. Put soiled tissues in the garbage right away.

What should I do if I get sick with RSV?

- Stay home and away from others until symptoms have gone.
- Get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids.
- See your doctor if your symptoms are severe.

