

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV): What Parents and Caregivers Need to Know

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Early fall, winter and spring are typically the seasons for cold and flu. It is important to understand Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and know how to prevent it so that you can protect yourself and your family.

What is respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a common virus that usually causes mild cold symptoms in adults and children. Newborn babies that are premature or have heart, lung, or immune system problems are at a high risk to get very sick if they become infected with RSV early in life. According to the Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal, an estimated 125,000 infants in the United States each year are hospitalized with severe RSV, the leading cause of infant hospitalizations. RSV is most common from October to March, although persons can become infected any time of the year. By the age of 2, almost all children are infected with RSV at least once.

What are the signs and symptoms of RSV?

The most common signs and symptoms of RSV are mild cold-like symptoms, such as runny nose and fever. RSV is very contagious and usually lasts from 8 to 15 days. Most cases are mild and require no specific treatment from doctors. However, RSV infections can lead to more serious illnesses in some babies. Persistent coughing, wheezing, rapid breathing, problems breathing or gasping for breath, blue color of the lips or around the mouth, difficulty sucking or swallowing, a high fever, are all serious signs and symptoms that should be reported to a health care provider immediately. Worsening symptoms can be severe and possibly life-threatening.

What are the risk factors for severe RSV disease?

- **Premature birth.** Infants born prematurely by more than 4 weeks are at higher risk to develop a serious RSV infection that may require hospitalization early in life.
- **Being born with lung or heart disease.**
- **Low birth weight.** Babies with a low birth weight are at an increased risk of death from RSV, according to the Journal of Pediatrics.
- **Older brothers and sisters.** Babies in contact with school-age siblings can get RSV during cold and flu season.
- **Going to day care.** Babies who attend day care are at higher risk to get RSV.
- **Tobacco smoke and other air pollutants.** Tobacco smoke and other pollutants can irritate a baby's lungs and make it harder to fight RSV.
- **Family history of asthma.** There is a higher risk for severe RSV in children with a family history of asthma.

Preventing RSV

It is important that parents and caregivers are aware of ways the RSV virus is spread. The virus can be spread through mouth or nose secretions such as with coughing or sneezing. It can also live on surfaces such as countertops and doorknobs, and on hands and clothing. RSV can be easily spread when a person touches the surface or object where the virus lives. The virus can live on surfaces for many hours and 30 minutes or more on hands.

Infants and children that are considered high risk for serious RSV disease can be given a monthly injection of a medication consisting of RSV antibodies during RSV season. Ask the physician to determine if the infant or child is considered high risk and eligible for this medication.

Parents and caregivers should be familiar with ways to help prevent the spread of RSV. Help protect infants and young children from RSV by:

- Keeping infants and children away from people who are sneezing or coughing.
- Making sure everyone who touches the infant has clean hands.
- Keeping infants away from crowds of people.
- Not allowing anyone to smoke near infants or children.
- Washing hands after having contact with someone who has any cold symptoms.
- Keeping school-age children with cold symptoms away from younger siblings until symptoms pass.