

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the symptoms of RSV?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms such as:

- Runny nose
- Decrease in appetite
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Wheezing

People infected with RSV usually show symptoms within 4 to 6 days after getting infected. Symptoms usually appear in stages and not all at once. In very young infants with RSV, the only symptoms may be irritability, decreased activity, and breathing difficulties.

Who gets RSV?

Virtually all children get an RSV infection by the time they are 2 years old. However, anyone can get an RSV infection at any age and you can become infected more than once in your lifetime. Infants, young children, and older adults are more likely to get serious complications if they get sick with RSV.

How is RSV spread?

Children are often exposed to and infected with RSV outside the home, such as in school or childcare centers. They can then transmit the virus to other members of the family.

RSV can spread when:

- An infected person coughs or sneezes
- You get virus droplets from a cough or sneeze in your eyes, nose, or mouth
- You have direct contact with the virus, such as kissing the face of a child with RSV
- You touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your face before washing your hands

RSV can survive for many hours on hard surfaces such as tables and crib rails. It typically lives on soft surfaces such as tissues and hands for shorter amounts of time. People infected with RSV are usually contagious for 3 to 8 days and may become contagious a day or two before showing signs of illness. However, some infants, and people with weakened immune systems, can continue to spread the virus even after they stop showing symptoms (for as long as 4 weeks).

Who is at risk for serious illness?

People at greatest risk for severe illness from RSV include:

- Premature infants
- Infants (especially those 6 months and younger)
- Children younger than 2 years old with chronic lung disease or congenital (present from birth) heart disease
- Children with weakened immune systems
- Children who have neuromuscular disorders, including those who have difficulty swallowing or clearing mucus secretions

- American Indian and Alaska Native Children
- Adults aged 50 to 74 who have certain underlying or chronic medical conditions, such as lung or heart disease, weakened immune systems, or living in nursing homes.
- Adults aged 75 and older

How is RSV diagnosed?

A health care provider may suspect RSV based on medical history, time of year, and a physical exam. A swab of the nose to look for viruses may be performed. In severe RSV cases that require hospitalization, additional testing will be needed.

What is the treatment for RSV?

Currently, there are no approved antiviral medications (medicines that fight viruses) recommended to fight infection. Most RSV infections go away on their own in a week or two. However, RSV can cause severe illness in some people. Antibiotics will not cure RSV infections because antibiotics only kill bacteria, not viruses.

What can be done to prevent severe RSV infections?

- Three RSV vaccines Arexvy (GSK), Abrysvo (Pfizer), and mRESVIA (Moderna) are licensed for use in adults. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends everyone ages 75 and older receive the RSV vaccine. People ages 50–74 who are at increased risk of severe RSV are also recommended to receive the RSV vaccine.
- CDC recommends a RSV monoclonal antibody (nirsevimab or clesrovimab) for babies, or the maternal vaccine (Pfizer Abrysvo) for pregnant mothers during weeks 32–36. Speak with your health care provider for more information.

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Local Health Department localhealth.nj.gov
- The NJ Department of Health nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cdc.gov/rsv/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.