

FACTSHEET



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Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

What is Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)?

Respiratory syncytial virus (or RSV) is one of the viruses that can cause the common cold. However, it can also cause more serious infections in young children. RSV is very contagious, and is usually more common during autumn and winter, although its patterns of transmission have been changing in recent years.

RSV can cause inflammation and mucus to build up in your child's airways, making it harder for them to breathe. In young children, RSV can cause [bronchiolitis](#) (inflammation and narrowing of the small breathing tubes in the lungs) and [pneumonia](#) (an infection of the lung). However, it is not usually treated with antibiotics, as it is caused by a virus.

Almost all children will have been infected with RSV by 3 years of age.

Children under 3 years can get severe infections. Babies under 6 months have an even higher risk, especially if they were born prematurely or have weak immune systems.

What are the symptoms?

Your child may have:

- runny nose
- cough
- fever
- headache
- lethargy (appears very unwell, sleepier or less active than usual)

Symptoms can be more severe in babies under 6 months of age and can include:

- wheezing
- shortness of breath
- irritability
- poor feeding

Your child's symptoms may get worse during the first 2-3 days and can last up to 10 days.

How is RSV spread?

RSV spreads very easily through droplets containing the virus when people cough or sneeze. It can also be spread by touching contaminated items (such as doorknobs, other surfaces or toys), and then touching the eyes, nose or mouth.

Your child may be infectious for 3 - 8 days after their symptoms begin.

Good hygiene is important to avoid spreading the virus:

- wash your own and your child's hands regularly
- avoid sharing cups, cutlery, toys and other items
- clean surfaces and items that may be contaminated, with household detergent

Can RSV be prevented?

A vaccine is currently not available for RSV. Some babies and children who have previously had the virus may have some immunity from being infected again.



It is important to keep your sick child at home until all their symptoms are gone, to help stop spreading the virus.

Remember to wash hands regularly.

Caring for your child at home

Most cases of RSV are mild and your child can be treated at home.

- Encourage your child to rest if they are feeling unwell
- Young babies may be more unsettled and need extra comforting
- Give your child small amounts of fluids to drink regularly, to prevent dehydration (eg – breastmilk, formula, milk or water)
- Saline (salt water) drops may be helpful to clear mucous or a blocked nose
- A warm shower or bath may also help to clear your child's nasal and respiratory congestion.
- Steam inhalation and vapourisers are not recommended, because of the risk of burns
- Paracetamol or ibuprofen can be used if your child is uncomfortable or has a fever (use the recommended dose on the bottle)
- Antibiotics will not help, unless they also have a bacterial infection (your GP will be able to diagnose this).

When should I see the doctor?

Take your child to the GP if you are concerned about them getting worse, or if they:

- have a fever and look unwell
- are having problems feeding
- their cough becomes worse, or they start to cough up mucus
- your child is dehydrated

For non-urgent advice, contact:

- your family GP
- healthdirect on 1800 022 222 for free 24 hour health advice

Hospital care

Some children with RSV can get very sick and may need treatment in hospital. They may need intravenous fluids, and extra oxygen to help with their breathing.

Call an ambulance (000) or take your child to the nearest hospital Emergency Department, if your child:

- appears very unwell and lethargic
- is having severe difficulty breathing
- is having trouble tolerating fluids, or has stopped passing urine
- is making a 'grunting' noise, or has blue-coloured lips or skin

Remember:

- RSV is a common virus that spreads very easily
- Wash hands regularly to stop spreading the virus
- Most cases of RSV are mild and can be treated at home
- RSV can cause bronchiolitis and pneumonia in children under 3 years
- Symptoms can get worse in the first two to three days and can last up to 10 days

Sources

NSW Health:

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/respiratory-syncytial-virus.aspx#>

Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service:

<https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/fact-sheet-respiratory-syncytial-virus>

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne:

https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Respiratory_syncytial_virus_RSV