

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County
Health Department

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a common and highly contagious respiratory virus. Almost all children get RSV at least once by the time they're 2 years old. RSV usually produces mild cold-like symptoms but can cause severe illness in infants and older adults.

What are the symptoms?

Infants may not have typical symptoms; instead, they may be fussy or less active. Symptoms usually show up within 4 to 6 days after being infected and commonly appear in stages (not all at once).

Symptoms usually include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Runny nose or sneezing
- Body aches
- Loss of appetite
- Wheezing

Most people who get RSV recover completely in 1 to 2 weeks, but some people may develop more severe infections, such as bronchiolitis and pneumonia. RSV-related complications can occur at any age; however, the elderly, those with chronic health problems, and infants younger than 6 months are much more likely to develop severe illness or be hospitalized from an RSV infection.

How is it spread?

RSV is spread through direct contact with respiratory droplets (i.e., coughing and sneezing). RSV can enter the body through the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, or mouth. RSV can survive on hard surfaces (i.e., tables and crib rails) for hours and can live on soft surfaces, like hands, for shorter amounts of time. Those at highest risk for infection attend childcare, school, or live in densely populated areas.

How is it treated?

- Get plenty of rest
- Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration (i.e., water, juice, tea)
- Take non-aspirin medication for fever and body aches (i.e., acetaminophen or ibuprofen). **Never give aspirin to children.**
- In severe cases, hospitalization may be necessary if the person is having trouble breathing, eating, or staying hydrated

How is it prevented?

There's no vaccine currently available for RSV, but there are preventive steps you can take to help stop the spread, including:

- Washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- Avoiding close contact with others (e.g., kissing, shaking hands, sharing drinks) especially with those who have cold or flu-like symptoms
- Clean frequently touched surfaces often (i.e., doorknobs, tables, devices)
- Wearing a mask when out in public or around others

Parents of children at high risk for developing severe RSV illness should try to avoid touching their face with unwashed hands, avoid close contact with sick people, and if possible, limit the time they spend in childcare centers during peak RSV season (late fall to early spring).

If you are experiencing cold-like symptoms you should try to avoid close contact with children at high risk for developing severe RSV illness, if possible. If not possible, you should carefully follow the above prevention steps.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

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