

RSV (Respiratory syncytial virus)

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is the most common virus that can infect the lungs and breathing tubes. RSV infection is most serious in young babies. Almost all children get the virus at least once before they are 2 years old. Older children and adults also get RSV at least every few years but do not usually get very sick from it.

How is it spread?

RSV is very contagious. The virus is most common between late fall and early spring. RSV spreads the same way as a common cold:

- By touching droplets containing the virus after someone coughs or sneezes.
- By being close (less than 2 meters apart) to someone with the infection who is coughing or sneezing. Droplets from the infected person can reach another person's nose or mouth.
- By touching something that has been touched by an infected person, such as toys, door handles, furniture or countertops.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

Children with RSV have the same symptoms as a common cold, which may include:

- coughing,
- a runny nose,
- fever,
- a decrease in appetite and energy,
- irritability.

Some children (most often very young babies) have bronchiolitis - an infection of the tiny airways that lead to the lungs that causes wheezing and difficulty breathing.

How is RSV treated?

RSV is usually mild and doesn't need any treatment. Most children get better within a week or two. Sometimes children need to be hospitalized so that they can be watched closely and given fluids or oxygen if needed.

Because RSV is a virus, antibiotics will not help a child get better faster. Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses.

How can I protect my child from RSV?

- Keep babies under 6 months old away from people with colds, if possible.
- Wash your hands and your children's hands often to reduce the spread of germs.
- Breastfeed your baby. Breast milk contains antibodies and other immune factors that help prevent and fight off illness.
- Don't smoke. Make sure that your children are not around cigarette smoke, especially in the car or in your home.
- Make sure your child receives all recommended immunizations. Vaccines won't prevent your child from getting RSV or other viruses that cause colds, but they will protect your child from some of the complications a cold can cause.
- There are some preventive injections, typically only offered to infants and children at risk of severe RSV infection (such as babies with heart or lung disease, or those who were born very early). Availability of these products depends on which province or territory you live in. Speak to your paediatrician for more information and to see if your child could benefit from one of these medications.

What can I do if my child is sick?

- Keep your child as comfortable as possible and offer plenty of fluids.
- Give acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever. Ibuprofen should only be given if your child is drinking reasonably well. Do not give ibuprofen to babies under 6 months old without first talking to your doctor.

- If your baby is having trouble drinking, try to clear nasal congestion gently with a bulb syringe or with saline (salt water) nose drops.
- Do not give over-the-counter cough and cold medicines to a child younger than 6 years old. Although these drugs do not need a doctor's prescription, they are not safe in young children.
- If you are using cough and cold medicines for children older than 6 years, read instructions carefully and give only the recommended dose.

When should I call a doctor?

Take your baby to an emergency department if your child:

- has trouble breathing or has lips that look blue,
- is younger than 3 months old and has a fever, or
- is no longer able to suck or drink.

See a doctor if your child:

- has had a fever for more than 72 hours,
- is not eating or is vomiting,
- is not having wet diapers, or
- is coughing so bad that they are choking or vomiting.

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Infectious Diseases and Immunization Committee



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