

Respiratory Syncytial Virus

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus or RSV?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a mild respiratory illness in most people but can make the elderly, the very young, people with lowered immune systems, lung problems, heart problems or premature babies very sick. People of all ages can become sick with RSV. Most babies get sick with RSV during their first year of life. Having RSV once does not mean that you cannot get it again. Re-infection throughout life is common.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of RSV infection?

Signs and symptoms of RSV can range from mild cold symptoms to severe respiratory distress and can include fever, loss of appetite, runny nose, cough, wheezing, sore throat, headache and a general feeling of being sick. Premature babies may not have respiratory symptoms and instead be very tired, irritable, feed poorly and may have short periods of interrupted breathing. Infection with RSV can make medical conditions such as asthma and chronic lung disease worse. Sometimes severe illness can result in pneumonia, bronchiolitis, ear infections and tonsillitis.

How is RSV spread?

RSV spreads by respiratory droplets in infected persons through coughing, sneezing or talking. It is also spread through contact with surfaces contaminated with RSV, such as toys, eating utensils, and unwashed hands. The virus can live on surfaces for many hours and on unwashed hands for a half hour. RSV is not spread through the air.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear and when will I feel better?

Symptoms generally begin 4-6 days after exposure. An ill person can spread the virus for up to 8 days and sometimes longer. It can take 1-2 weeks to feel better.

How is RSV treated?

Most cases of RSV do not require any treatment and the ill person recovers on their own. For severe cases, oxygen and/or an antiviral medication may be prescribed. It is important to drink lots of fluids to avoid dehydration and to watch for increased difficulty in breathing.

How can we prevent the spread of RSV?

- **Wash your hands.** Make sure hands are properly washed after wiping a child's nose, coughing, sneezing, blowing the nose, shaking hands, before eating, before touching the eyes, nose or mouth.

The six steps to good hand washing are:

1. Wet hands with warm running water
2. Put liquid soap on hands
3. Lather hands and scrub for 20 seconds
4. Rinse under running water
5. Dry your hands with paper towels
6. Use the towel to turn off the taps

If your hands are not visibly dirty, an alcohol-based hand rub can be added to your hand hygiene routine:

1. Apply the hand rub to your hands. Use an amount about the size of a dime.
 2. Rub your hands together until the hand rub is gone. Hands will feel dry in about 15 seconds.
- **Cover your cough or sneeze.** Coughing and sneezing can spread germs to others. Cough or sneeze into a tissue and throw it away. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve. Always clean your hands after coughing or sneezing.
 - **Clean surfaces.** Frequently clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that are touched a lot like doorknobs, keyboards, counter tops, sink taps, toys, light switches, hand railings, remote controls, phones etc. Disinfection should be done with a common household disinfectant, or a mild bleach and water solution: mix 1 ml ($\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon) of unscented household bleach into 500 ml (2 cups) of water. It is important to let the sanitized surface air-dry.
 - **Stay home if you are ill.** Sick people who go to work, school and other public places can spread their illnesses to others. Staying home when you are ill is important to help reduce the spread of illness.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Infectious Disease Control Team at 519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2005). Respiratory Syncytial Virus. Retrieved January 12, 2016 from www.cdc.gov/Features/RSV/

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