

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) in Infants and Children

What is RSV?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a virus that causes a lung infection called bronchiolitis. Babies commonly get RSV. The virus is so widespread that almost all children have had a RSV infection by the time they are 2-3 years old.

Premature babies or babies who get RSV during the first months of life are more likely to have pneumonia or need oxygen. Toddlers and older children with RSV usually do not have serious problems. For these children, RSV is usually no worse than a bad cold.

How does RSV spread?

RSV is highly contagious, it is spread by contact with infected fluids from the nose or mouth and through droplets in the air from coughing. RSV usually spreads in the wintertime.

What are the symptoms?

Severe cases of infection with RSV can cause a condition known as bronchiolitis, where the small airways of the lungs are infected.

Symptoms of bronchiolitis include:

- cough
- fever
- wheezing
- difficult or rapid breathing
- some babies and small children may have so much trouble breathing that they cannot eat

- Severe RSV infection can also cause pneumonia.

In less severe cases or in older children, RSV can cause:

- common cold symptoms (cough and runny nose)
- ear infections
- eye redness and irritation (conjunctivitis)
- cough and sore, scratchy throat (croup)

How is it diagnosed?

RSV generally occurs in the winter and spring, so most health care providers diagnose it when a child has the symptoms during RSV season. Providers may also make a diagnosis by testing mucus from the nose.

How is it treated?

Suctioning

Use a bulb syringe to help suck out the mucus from your child's nose. This will help your child breathe more easily. When young children are more severely infected, they may need to be in the hospital for oxygen and suctioning of airways below the nose and throat.

Medicine

Because RSV is caused by a virus and not a bacteria, antibiotics are not helpful unless your child also has a bacterial infection. Sometimes, a doctor may prescribe inhaled or oral asthma-type medicine to help your child breathe easier.

Sometimes doctors give a preventative medicine called palivizumab (brand name Synagis®) to high risk children. This medicine may reduce the likelihood

of severe complications of RSV for high risk children. Synagis may still get RSV but are less likely to get sick enough to be hospitalized

How long will it last?

RSV illness usually lasts anywhere from 7 -21 days.

How can I help prevent RSV?

RSV is such a common virus that it is almost impossible to prevent your child from exposure. One thing you can do is encourage people who are in contact with your young baby to wash their hands before holding your child. Also, you can try to keep your baby away from people with cold symptoms.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call immediately if:

- Your child has very rapid breathing (more than 60 breaths in a minute) or difficulty breathing.
- Your child has had no wet diapers for more than 8 hours.
- Your child is extremely tired or hard to wake up.
- You cannot console your child.

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