

# Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)



Infectious Disease  
Epidemiology &  
Prevention Division

July 2024

## What is RSV?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a virus that can cause respiratory illness in people of all ages, but can be more serious for infants and older adults. RSV can cause upper respiratory infections such as the common cold, or more serious lower respiratory infections, such as pneumonia. Babies, young children, adults aged 60 and older, and those with weakened immune systems are at greater risk of serious infections.

## What are the symptoms of RSV?

Symptoms of RSV may include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sneeze
- Wheezing
- Difficulty breathing
- Runny nose
- Loss of appetite

## Infants and Younger Children

Infants who get RSV almost always show symptoms. In young infants, look for signs of irritability, decreased activity, reduced eating and drinking, and pauses in breathing for more than 10 seconds. See a healthcare provider **immediately** if your infant has difficulty breathing, eating and drinking, or if symptoms worsen.

## Older Children and Adults

Symptoms in older children and adults include mild-to-moderate cold-like symptoms, such as fever, runny nose, sore throat, cough, and sometimes wheezing. Individuals within this age range can sometimes have RSV without showing symptoms.

## How long do symptoms last?

Symptoms generally appear within two to eight days of exposure. Healthy infants infected with RSV do not usually need to be hospitalized. If necessary, hospitalization usually lasts a few days, with a full recovery taking about one to two weeks.

## Who is at risk for severe RSV?

Premature infants, children fewer than 2 years of age with congenital heart or chronic lung disease, and children with compromised immune systems are at highest risk for severe disease. Adults with compromised immune systems and those 60 and older are also at an increased risk of severe disease.

## Fast Facts

- RSV can be more serious for infants and older adults
- Seek immediate medical assistance if your infant has difficulty breathing, eating, and drinking, or if symptoms worsen
- Vaccines for RSV are fairly new but can help prevent illness for pregnant women, infants, and older adults

## How do I know if I have RSV?

See your healthcare provider. Your health care provider will review your symptoms and may take a swab of your throat or back of your nose to test at a lab.

## How is RSV transmitted?

RSV is spread through respiratory droplets from close contact with an infected person or direct contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. Infection can occur when you get virus droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze in your eyes, nose, or mouth. Infection can also occur from direct and indirect contact with nasal or oral secretions from infected persons. Direct contact with the virus can occur, for example, by kissing the face of a person with RSV. RSV outbreaks generally occur during the winter months from November to April.

## How is RSV treated?

For mild disease, no specific medicine is necessary other than the treatment of symptoms (pain reliever, fever reducer). Patients with severe disease may require oxygen therapy or hospitalization. Special breathing treatments may be used in the treatment of some patients with severe disease.

## How is RSV prevented?



Cover your cough and sneezes.



Disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as toys and doorknobs, especially if someone is sick.



Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.



Avoid sharing items such as cups, drinking glasses, and eating utensils with persons who are sick.



Stay home when you are sick. Exclude children from schools and child care if they have a fever or other respiratory symptoms, and limit contact with other children.



Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently.

## Immunization

Vaccination can prevent illness caused by RSV and is approved for the following groups:

- **Pregnant women:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends one dose of maternal RSV vaccine (RSVpreF) prior to or during RSV season, during weeks 32-36 of pregnancy, to prevent RSV illness in infants. This vaccine provides infants with up to six months of protection after birth but decreases over time. More information can be found [here](#).
- **Infants and toddlers:** The CDC recommends that infants 8 months old or younger receive one dose of nirsevimab prior to or during their first RSV season, if they are not protected by maternal vaccine. The drug palivizumab may be administered to high-risk infants in place of nirsevimab. It is important to note that palivizumab cannot prevent infection, but may be able to prevent severe RSV illness in certain infants and young children. Please consult your pediatrician to determine what option is right for your child. More information can be found [here](#).
- **Older adults (60+):** The CDC recommends a single vaccine dose prior to RSV season for adults aged 60 and older. More information can be found [here](#).