



Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Fact Sheet

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a common respiratory illness of childhood. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that most children have been infected by 2 years of age.

How would I know if my child had RSV?

RSV infection is most commonly found in children less than two years of age. Upper respiratory tract infections such as the common cold are often the result of infection. Some children can develop lower respiratory tract infections, which can lead to pneumonia-like symptoms and croup (a barking cough or hoarseness, especially when crying). Adults may become infected with RSV, but infection either produces mild, cold-like symptoms or no symptoms at all. Most adults have been exposed to RSV many different times in their lives.

Symptoms usually occur 4-6 days after infection, and children typically recover within 1-2 weeks. Infants and children with weakened immune systems can spread the virus 1-3 weeks after symptoms have resolved.

How do you get RSV?

You can become infected with RSV by breathing in viral particles forced out into the air by the coughs or sneezes of an infected person. You can also contract an RSV infection from an infected person that doesn't wash his or her hands after coughing or sneezing into them. The virus can be transferred from their hands to yours by shaking hands or if they touch something that you also touch. If you don't wash your hands before you rub your eyes or put your hands in or near your mouth after touching a contaminated surface, you can get RSV.

How can I keep from getting RSV?

Unfortunately, it is so easy to get RSV that if it is going around, you have a good chance of becoming exposed to it-especially if you have children in day care. It is very important to remember that frequent and correct hand washing is the best thing anyone can do to prevent infection and reduce the spread of any disease. Also, do not use a handkerchief to blow your nose or cover coughs and sneezes. Instead, use disposable tissues and throw them away immediately after use. Always cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze and avoid touching anything until you can wash your hands thoroughly.

Can RSV be treated?

Physicians may prescribe a drug called ribavirin to treat severe infections in hospitalized infants, but otherwise, no. Generally, symptoms can be treated with over-the-counter cold medications. It is important to increase your fluid intake and bed rest can help severe infections. Do not use aspirin for fever in children under 18 years of age. Aspirin use has been associated with Reye Syndrome when given during certain viral illnesses. If children appear very ill or do not seem to be responding to fluids and bed rest, contact your health care provider for recommendations, as some RSV infections can become severe.

Should I stay home from work or school or keep my child out of childcare with an RSV infection?

To prevent the spread of illness, adults and children should stay home from work, school and/or childcare with a fever or upper respiratory symptoms such as a cough.

*For further information, contact the Oklahoma City-County Health Department
(405) 425-4437*

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