

Facts & DETAILS

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

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What is RSV?

Respiratory syncytial (pronounced sin-SISH-uhl) virus (RSV) is a respiratory virus that infects a person's lungs and airways.

How common is RSV?

In the United States, RSV is the most common cause of pneumonia and bronchiolitis (redness and swelling of the small airways of the lungs) in infants less than one year of age. Almost all children are infected by their second birthday; a small percentage develop severe disease requiring hospitalization. RSV is seasonal, occurring most often in the fall, winter, and early spring.

How do people become infected?

RSV is easily spread from person to person by sneezing or coughing. Infection occurs when a person contacts saliva or nose secretions directly on their face or touches contaminated surfaces before touching their face.

What are the signs and symptoms of RSV?

RSV can cause upper respiratory tract infections (such as colds) and lower respiratory tract infections (such as bronchiolitis and pneumonia). Symptoms begin with a runny nose and decreased appetite, developing into coughing, sneezing, and fever one to three days later. Wheezing may also occur. Very young infants may display irritability, decreased activity, and breathing difficulties.

Who is at risk for RSV?

People can become infected with RSV more than once, but usually the first infection is the most severe. Infants and people with weakened immune systems may experience more severe illness.

How is RSV treated?

RSV is caused by a virus, so antibiotics won't work. For individuals with mild disease, no specific treatment is necessary other than the treatment of symptoms (e.g., Tylenol to reduce fever). Children with severe disease may require hospitalization.

How can you prevent RSV?

There is no vaccine for RSV. Good handwashing and cleanliness are the only defense to help prevent RSV spread. You can help prevent infection by taking these simple steps:

- Wash hands thoroughly and often.
- Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing and dispose of tissues properly.
- Stay home or keep children home when ill.
- Avoid sharing cups and eating utensils.
- Do not kiss sick people; do not kiss others while sick.

A drug called palivizumab is available to prevent severe RSV illness in certain infants and children who are at high risk, such as premature infants. If your child is at high risk for severe RSV disease, talk to your healthcare provider to see if palivizumab can be used as a preventative measure.

For More Information:
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