



Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a viral infection of the respiratory (breathing) tract. Almost all children will get RSV at least once by the time they are 2. It's the most common cause of respiratory infections in this age group but may cause severe illness in children under 1. While there is no vaccine for RSV, there are many ways to limit the spread.

Symptoms

Most people with RSV have mild symptoms lasting five to seven days. RSV causes cold symptoms in the upper respiratory tract, which includes the nose, mouth, and throat. Sometimes, it can lead to breathing problems in the small airways (bronchiolitis) or lungs (pneumonia) of the lower respiratory tract. These serious breathing problems may require hospitalization. Young children becoming more severely ill may feed poorly, have fewer wet diapers, be less active, or be more difficult to soothe — with or without worsening respiratory symptoms. Children with any symptoms of more severe illness should see a health care provider.



As with any illness, notify families with any concerns about a child's health and contact 911 or your local emergency system if you think a child may be having a medical emergency.

RSV Symptoms in Young Children

Upper Respiratory Tract Infection

Cold symptoms may include:

- Runny nose
- Poor feeding
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Fussiness

Lower Respiratory Tract Infection

Symptoms of severe illness may include cold symptoms plus:

- Fast breathing
- Flaring nostrils
- Grunting noise with breathing
- Head bobbing with breathing
- Belly moving with breathing
- Ribs pulling in while breathing
- Wheezing

For more information about RSV and a video showing symptoms of respiratory distress, see [RSV: When It's More Than Just a Cold](#), from the American Academy of Pediatrics.



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How It Spreads

RSV spreads very easily from person to person through:

- Droplets in the air from a cough or sneeze
- Direct contact with nose and mouth secretions
- Contact with the virus on hands, surfaces, toys, and other objects and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes before washing your hands

Young children with the infection can spread the virus before they get symptoms and for days or weeks after getting sick. RSV infections occur throughout the year, but most outbreaks are in winter.

Who Is at Risk

Premature infants and young children with heart or lung disease or weakened immune systems are at highest risk for severe RSV. Severe cases may require hospitalization.

Early childhood program staff are often exposed to children with RSV and may get infected more than once. Adults who are older, who have chronic heart or lung disease, or who have weakened immune systems are at higher risk for severe RSV.

Diagnosis

Health care providers usually diagnose RSV based on symptoms and a physical exam. They sometimes test for RSV with a nasal swab. RSV symptoms can be like COVID-19 and influenza, so health care providers may test for all three illnesses at the same time.

Limit the Spread

Follow infection control practices to help keep children and adults healthy.

- Stay home when you're sick.
- Do [daily health checks](#) as children enter your program for the day.
- Wash hands often with soap and water throughout the day.
- Don't allow children to share mouthed toys, cups, or eating utensils.
- Clean, sanitize, and disinfect surfaces regularly.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Throw away used tissues, and wash hands after using tissues.
- Change clothing soiled with mucous.
- Have fresh air indoors and spend time outdoors.



Use these strategies to reduce the spread of RSV.

- Let families know if your program has cases of RSV so they can watch for symptoms and practice prevention at home. Remember, the name of the child who is sick is confidential information.
- Watch children throughout the day for signs of illness and contact their parent or guardian if they become too sick to stay in the program.
- [Keep children home](#) if they:
 - Are too sick to take part in your program's activities
 - Need more care than staff can give without compromising the health and safety of other children
- Help families and staff understand that RSV, influenza, COVID-19, and the common cold viruses can all make children and adults sick. People can be sick with more than one virus at a time, and programs may have cases of more than one virus at a time.
- Encourage vaccination against influenza and COVID-19 to help decrease the spread and severity of these viruses.



National Center on
Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety

1-888-227-5125
health@ecetta.info

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health>

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