

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

Updated 16 April 2024

RSV is a common cause of respiratory infection. It mostly affects young children. Adults can also get sick from RSV. RSV symptoms are usually mild. However, some children and adults can get very sick. They may need to go to hospital for treatment. Some babies and older people can have a RSV immunisation or vaccine.

What is respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) causes respiratory infections. RSV mostly affects young children. Adults can also get sick from RSV. Most infections in NSW happen in late autumn or winter.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

Most people only get mild symptoms. Symptoms usually begin around 2 to 8 days after exposure to the virus.

Symptoms can include:

- runny nose
- cough
- wheeze
- difficulty breathing
- fever
- cyanosis (bluish or greyish colour of the skin).

Babies under one year of age are more likely to get breathing problems from RSV infection. This can include bronchiolitis or pneumonia. Babies may be unsettled or have trouble with feeding.

How is RSV spread?

RSV is **very infectious**. This means it spreads easily from one person to another. People are usually infectious when they have symptoms.

RSV is spread in droplets. These droplets get into the air or on a surface when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes.

You can get RSV if you:

- breathe in the droplets from an infected person
- touch a surface or object that droplets from an infected person have landed on and then touch your mouth or nose.

Am I at higher risk of severe illness from RSV?

RSV can affect anyone. You will likely only have a mild illness.

However, some people can get very sick. This includes:

- babies aged 12 months and under, especially those aged 6 months and under
- young children aged 2 years and under with medical conditions. This could be chronic lung disease or congenital heart disease.
- infants and young children aged 2 and under who were born pre-term or with a low birthweight
- older adults, especially those with chronic heart or lung disease or weakened immune systems.

If your child has asthma, RSV may cause a flare-up of their symptoms (asthma attack).

People who get severely unwell may need to go to hospital to help manage their symptoms.

How do I protect myself and others from RSV?

The best way to reduce the risk of spreading RSV is to have good hygiene.

If you or your child have RSV symptoms, please help protect others:

- stay at home. If you do need to leave home when you are sick, wear a mask
- cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- do not visit high risk settings (such as hospitals or aged care facilities) or people at higher risk of severe illness. This includes babies, infants, older people and those who are immunocompromised.

Is there a vaccine or immunisation for RSV?

Some babies and older people can get a RSV immunisation or vaccine.

Your baby

Some babies are at higher risk of severe illness from RSV (see 'Who is at higher risk of severe illness from RSV?' section above). They may be eligible to get an immunisation. These immunisations help protect them from severe illness.

The immunisation is called Beyfortus™ (nirsevimab). In NSW, it is given to babies under 12 months of age who are at the highest risk of severe illness from RSV.

A doctor will tell you if immunisation is right for your baby. They will organise it for you.

If you are a parent or carer, read the [Beyfortus™ \(nirsevimab\) information](#).

If you are aged over 60

A RSV vaccine called Arexvy is available if you are aged 60 years and older and may be at higher risk of severe illness from RSV. This vaccine is not free.

Speak to your doctor or pharmacist to learn more about the vaccine, whether it is recommended for you and cost. Read the [latest advice from the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation \(ATAGI\)](#).

How is RSV diagnosed?

Your doctor can check if you or your child has RSV by doing a nose or throat swab (PCR test). Sometimes doctors can diagnose RSV based on signs and symptoms.

How is RSV managed?

Most people with RSV can manage their symptoms safely at home.

Most symptoms can be managed with:

- rest
- paracetamol and ibuprofen to relieve pain
- regular sips of water or frequent feeds for babies to stay hydrated.

Continue to take any medications you have been prescribed by your doctor. Call your doctor or healthdirect (1800 022 222) if you are unsure about your current medication or treatment or worried about your symptoms.

You or your child may need to go to hospital for treatment if your symptoms are severe.

How do I look after a baby or child with RSV?

RSV can cause a chest infection called bronchiolitis. Bronchiolitis can usually be managed at home. Read more [information about bronchiolitis](#).

Symptoms can be more severe in babies under six months of age. They can include:

- wheezing
- shortness of breath
- irritability
- poor feeding

Call Triple Zero (000) or go to a hospital emergency department immediately if your child shows severe symptoms like:

- difficulty breathing
 - grunting noises while breathing
 - dehydration – when a child is not taking in enough fluid
 - blue-coloured lips or skin.
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Further information

Speak to your doctor or call healthdirect on 1800 022 222 for free 24-hour health advice.

The National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) also has [frequently asked questions about RSV](#).