



Respiratory viruses

What is a respiratory virus?

Respiratory viruses cause illnesses that affect the nose, throat and breathing passages including the lungs. These viruses commonly result in mild cold or flu like symptoms in most people, except in those with risk factors, the elderly and the very young. Common respiratory viruses include:

Name	What are common symptoms?	What age groups get this virus or are at highest risk?	What complications can occur?
Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)	Symptoms are usually similar to the common cold.	Children under the age of 3 years are at the highest risk of getting RSV. Babies under 6 months old can have more severe illness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ear infections • bronchiolitis • pneumonia
Human parainfluenza virus (HPIV)	Usually causes a mild infection similar to a common cold.	Young children and people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk of complications of HPIV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • croup • bronchitis • bronchiolitis • pneumonia
Adenovirus	Can cause mild flu-like symptoms, conjunctivitis or gastrointestinal symptoms like stomach pain, diarrhea or vomiting.	People with weakened immune systems are at high risk of developing severe illness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Severe illness is less common
Rhinovirus	Usually causes a mild infection similar to a common cold.	One of the most frequent causes of the common cold in adults and children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sinus infections • ear infections
Human metapneumovirus (HMPV)	Usually causes a mild infection similar to a common cold.	Young children, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems are at high risk of complications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bronchitis • pneumonia

This factsheet does not include information on [COVID-19](#) and [flu](#).

How do respiratory viruses spread?

Respiratory viruses are spread from person to person by:

- breathing in droplets when someone with the virus breathes, coughs or sneezes
- touching a contaminated surface or object that a person with the virus has coughed or sneezed on, then touching their own eyes, nose or mouth.

What are common symptoms of respiratory viruses?

Symptoms may be different depending on which virus is causing the illness and people with the same virus may have different symptoms and severity.

However, there are symptoms that are common to many respiratory viruses. These include fever, cough, runny nose, sneezing, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, fatigue and feeling generally unwell.

Symptoms will often be mild or moderate, but some people may get very unwell and this is usually due to complications from worsening infection:

- **Bronchiolitis** - swelling and congestion in the small airways (bronchioles) of the lungs causing a bubbling sound when listening to breathing. This occurs most commonly in young children and children under the age of 1. This can make it harder to breathe, drink and eat.
- **Bronchitis** - swelling and congestion of the large airways (bronchi) of the lungs causing a cough with phlegm and shortness of breath that can take weeks to resolve. This can occur in older children and adults.

- **Croup** - swelling of the upper airway including the voice box (larynx) and windpipe (trachea) making a person work harder to breathe, especially at night. It commonly presents with a barking cough that starts after a child has had a mild cold for a few days. Most likely to occur in children.
- **Pneumonia** - infection and swelling of the lungs which has symptoms including a cough with phlegm, fever, chills and difficulty breathing. Can affect people of all age groups, but is most severe in children under the age of 1, children and older people.
- **Acute Sinusitis** - infection and swelling of the sinuses causing pressure and pain in the face. Most likely to occur in adults and older children.
- **Acute Ear Infections** (Otitis Media) - infection of the middle ear causing pain and fever. Most likely to occur in children who will often pull or hold the affected ear.
- **Hoarse Voice (Laryngitis)** – swelling of the voice box and vocal cords which causes temporary loss of voice. Can affect people of all age groups.

Who is at higher risk of severe illness?

While anyone can get respiratory viruses, those who are at higher risk of severe illness include:

- People aged 60 years and older
- Pregnant women
- Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander people (from age 35 years and over)
- People with obesity, diabetes, serious cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease (including severe asthma requiring hospitalisation in last 12 months), severe chronic liver or kidney disease, active cancer or who are immunocompromised
- Some people with a disability including those with a disability that affects their lungs, heart or immune system
- Residents of aged care and disability care facilities
- People aged 18 years and older who are unvaccinated

Older age is a risk factor for serious illness, particularly when combined with significant underlying health conditions.

If you are at higher risk of severe illness talk to your doctor about what you should do if you get a respiratory virus.

How long does it take to get sick after catching a respiratory virus?

Most people develop symptoms between 1 to 10 days after getting infected, depending on which virus they have.

How long am I infectious for (able to pass the infection on to other people)?

If you have a respiratory virus infection, you are usually most contagious in the first few days that you have symptoms. However, sometimes people are infectious a few days before their symptoms start. While you continue to have a fever or generally feel unwell, you are still infectious. Some people, particularly those who are immunosuppressed, can remain infectious after they have recovered from their illness.

What should I do if I get a respiratory virus?

Most people can manage respiratory illnesses safely at home with rest, regular paracetamol or ibuprofen and keeping hydrated with frequent sips of water.

Remember all medicines should be used following the manufacturer's instructions:

- Paracetamol may be used for relief of symptoms
- Ibuprofen is an anti-inflammatory which can be used for short-term relief of pain, fever and inflammation.
- Aspirin should not be given to children.
- Antibiotics do not help as they have no effect on viruses, and can be harmful if taken incorrectly.

When should I see a doctor?

Seek medical advice at any time you are concerned about your symptoms, or if you have any of the following:

- worsening symptoms (including if symptoms were getting better but are now getting worse again)
- shortness of breath making it difficult to walk or conduct usual activities
- difficulty breathing, chest tightness that lasts for more than 10 minutes
- confusion and difficulty remembering day, date or names
- inability to keep liquids down because of vomiting
- symptoms of dehydration (such as being dizzy when standing up)

Talk to your GP, call healthdirect on 1800 022 222, or the NSW COVID-19 and Flu Support Line on 1800 960 933 if you need further advice.

If your symptoms become severe, call Triple Zero (000) immediately.

How do I reduce my risk of getting respiratory viruses, or passing them on to others?

There are simple steps you can take to help protect yourself, your family and your community. These include:

- Wear a face mask. Masks provide an extra layer of protection against viral illnesses and are strongly recommended in crowded places.
- Wash your hands regularly, and as soon as possible after sneezing or coughing. Use soap and water and wash for 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser if you can't wash your hands with soap and water.
- Avoid sharing cups, glasses and cutlery with people who are sick. Regularly wash or wipe down utensils and surfaces with a household cleaner that contains soap or detergent.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing and sneezing, or use your elbow. Don't use your hands. Dispose of tissues straight away in a bin.
- Stay at home if you feel unwell so you don't pass your virus to other people.
- Keep children away from school and early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings while they have symptoms. This includes childcare, long day care, family day care and outside school hours care.