

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

Fact sheet

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) causes respiratory infections. Respiratory infections can affect the nose, throat and breathing passages including the lungs. RSV can cause severe illness in babies and young children. Adults can also get sick from RSV. Most RSV infections in NSW happen in late autumn and 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.

RSV can lead to serious chest infections in babies under one year of age. When RSV causes bronchiolitis or pneumonia the severe breathing problems may need treatment in hospital.

RSV in childhood can also lead to long term respiratory problems such as asthma that persist into adulthood.

How is RSV spread?

RSV is very infectious. This means it spreads easily from one person to another. People are most 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, eyes or nose.

Am I at higher risk of severe illness from RSV?

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

- babies aged under 12 months, especially those younger than 6 months.
- children aged 2 years and under with certain medical conditions. This could be chronic lung disease or congenital heart disease.
- children aged 2 and under who were born early (before 32 weeks)
- 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 become severely unwell may need to go to hospital to help manage their symptoms.

How do I protect my baby from RSV?

Having a maternal RSV vaccine (Abrysvo®) in pregnancy is a safe and effective way to protect your newborn baby against RSV in their first 6 months. Vaccination with Abrysvo® in pregnancy is recommended for all pregnant women. This vaccine can be given anytime between 28 and 36 weeks of pregnancy. It is usually given at 28 weeks at the same time as the whooping cough or influenza vaccine. Your maternity care provider should give you the RSV vaccine as part of your routine care.

For babies who are not protected by pregnancy vaccination, an infant RSV immunisation product (nirsevimab)¹ is recommended at birth to protect them from RSV. Nirsevimab is also recommended for babies with medical conditions that increase their risk of severe RSV. It is a pre-made antibody that gives babies immediate protection from RSV.

How do I protect myself if I am aged 60 years and over?

A RSV vaccine is available at cost if you are aged 60 years and over as you may be at higher risk of severe illness from RSV. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist to learn the cost, and whether these vaccines are recommended for you. Find out more in the Australian Immunisation Handbook - Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)².

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.

- Cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze or cough.
- Practice good hand hygiene, including regular hand washing, especially after you sneeze or cough.
- Stay at home if you have cold or flu symptoms and wear a mask if you need to leave home.
 - Children under 12 years should wear an appropriately fitted mask.
 - Masks are not suitable for children under 2 years as they can be choking hazards.

¹ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/nirsevimab-parents-and-carers.aspx>

² <https://immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au/contents/vaccine-preventable-diseases/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv>

- Don't visit people who are at higher risk of severe illness if you have cold or flu symptoms, especially babies and older people.
- Avoid crowded places and get together outdoors or in large, well-ventilated spaces.

How is RSV diagnosed?

Your doctor or health care provider 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 at home. The symptoms of RSV are like many other respiratory illnesses and can be managed in the same way.

Most symptoms can be managed with:

- rest
- paracetamol and ibuprofen to relieve pain or fever
- regular sips of water to stay hydrated.

Continue taking your usual medications.

Babies with mild symptoms of RSV need small, regular amounts of fluid (breastmilk or infant formula).

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

Call your doctor or healthdirect (1800 022 222) if you are unsure about your current medication or treatment or worried about your symptoms. Healthdirect is a free helpline, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, managed by registered nurses who provide medical advice.

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.

Further information

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

- [Maternal RSV vaccination \(Abrysvo®\) fact sheet - Information for pregnant women³](#)
- [Infant RSV immunisation \(nirsevimab\) fact sheet - Information for parents and carers⁴](#)
- [National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance \(NCIRS\) - Frequently asked questions about RSV⁵](#)
- [Australian Immunisation Handbook - Respiratory syncytial virus \(RSV\)⁶](#).

³ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/pages/abrysvo.aspx>

⁴ <https://edit.moh.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/nirsevimab-parents-and-carers.aspx>

⁵ <https://ncirs.org.au/ncirs-fact-sheets-faqs-and-other-resources/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv-frequently-asked>

⁶ <https://immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au/contents/vaccine-preventable-diseases/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv>