

RSV season: What parents need to know

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Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), a virus that can cause severe problems, especially for young children and older adults, has increased illness and hospitalizations.

"We're seeing relatively high rates of infection occur earlier in the fall than usual," says Dr. Nipunie Rajapakse, a pediatric infectious diseases physician with the Mayo Clinic Children's Center. "Typically, we don't see a lot of circulation of this virus until November. But this year, we are seeing much more than we generally see."

It's a prevalent virus that mostly causes mild, cold-like symptoms. Most children will be infected with the virus by age 2. But for some children, it can be severe.

"RSV virus is a respiratory virus. When it infects young children, especially those under 2 years of age, it causes inflammation in the airways. It is the most common cause of bronchiolitis, inflammation of the small airways in the lung, and the most common cause of pneumonia in [young kids](#)," says Dr. Rajapakse.

Dr. Rajapakse says because children have a small airway when they develop inflammation due to RSV, it can cause difficulty breathing. Because of

this, many children need to be hospitalized to manage their RSV infection, especially kids under 6 months old.

Symptoms

Early symptoms of RSV infection may be mild. It may take a few days into the illness for more severe symptoms to evolve.

"Symptoms of RSV include fever, coughing, difficulty breathing, wheezing, kids might not want to feed as much or have difficulty feeding, and they may be more fatigued than usual. The real things we make sure to ask parents to look out for are signs of difficulty breathing or working hard to breathe. This can include sucking in. You might notice it at the base of the throat or between the ribs, a child that's breathing fast, a child that's having difficulty breathing and feeding to the point where they're getting dehydrated," Dr. Rajapakse says.

Treatment

Seek immediate medical care if your child (or an adult) has difficulty breathing.

Most mild RSV cases go away in a week or two. There are no specific treatments, though you may want to administer over-the-counter fever and pain relievers (never give aspirin to children). And drink plenty of fluid.

Prevention

There are no preventive RSV vaccines currently.

There is an antibody product called palivizumab for some children who may be eligible. It is administered usually in five monthly doses throughout the RSV season. Dr. Rajapakse says those children are a relatively small group, including those with underlying conditions, such as [heart disease](#), [lung disease](#) or children who were born prematurely.

Tips for parents to help reduce RSV infection:

- Wash your hands frequently. Teach your children the importance of hand-washing.
- Avoid exposure. Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Limit your child's contact with people who have fevers or colds.
- Keep things clean. Make sure kitchen and bathroom countertops, doorknobs and handles are clean. Discard used tissues right away.
- Don't share drinking glasses with others.
- Don't smoke. Babies exposed to [tobacco smoke](#) have a higher risk of getting RSV and potentially more severe symptoms.
- Wash toys regularly. Do this, especially when your child or a playmate is sick.

Along with those tips, Dr. Rajapakse says the measures that were adopted for the COVID-19 pandemic are also effective for helping slow the spread of other respiratory viruses, like RSV.

"RSV is a respiratory virus, so it's spread by respiratory droplets or by touching droplets from someone who's infected. Avoiding people who are sick, washing your hands, even wearing a mask would prevent transmission of RSV as well," adds Dr. Rajapakse. Children under 2 are not recommended to wear masks.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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