Tips to Grow By™

Akron Children's Hospital

RSV

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?

Respiratory syncytial (sin-SISH-ul) virus (RSV) is a major cause of respiratory illness in young children. The virus infects the lungs and breathing passages.

Kids with RSV might have cold symptoms, such as:
- a stuffy or runny nose
- sore throat
- mild headache
- cough
- fever
- a general ill feeling

RSV infections in premature babies, infants, and kids with diseases that affect the lungs, heart, or immune system, can lead to other, more serious illnesses such as pneumonia or bronchiolitis.

Is RSV contagious?

RSV is highly contagious. It spreads through droplets containing the virus when someone coughs or sneezes. It also can live on surfaces (like counters or doorknobs) and on hands and clothing. So people can get it if they touch something that's contaminated.

RSV can spread quickly through schools and childcare centers. Babies often get it when older kids carry the virus home from school and pass it to them. Almost all kids have had RSV at least once by the time they're 2 years old.

RSV infections often happen in epidemics that last from late fall through early spring. Respiratory illness caused by RSV — such as bronchiolitis or pneumonia — usually lasts about a week, but some cases may last several weeks.

How is RSV diagnosed?

Doctors usually diagnose RSV by taking a medical history and doing an exam. In most healthy kids, they don't need to distinguish RSV from a common cold.

But if a child has other health conditions, the doctor might want to make a specific RSV diagnosis. In that case, the virus is identified by testing nasal fluids. The sample is collected either with a cotton swab or by suction through a bulb syringe.

How is RSV treated?

Most cases of RSV are mild and don't need medical treatment from doctors. Antibiotics aren't used because RSV is a virus and antibiotics work only against bacteria. Sometimes, doctors give medicine to help open airways.

RSV infection can be more serious in babies, though. Some might need treatment in a hospital. There, they can be watched closely and get fluids, if needed, and treatment for any breathing problems.

Home care

At home:
- Make your child as comfortable as possible.
- Allow time for recovery.
- Provide plenty of fluids. Babies may not feel like drinking, so offer fluids in small amounts often.

Avoid hot-water and steam humidifiers, which can be hazardous and can cause scalding. If you use a cool-mist humidifier, clean it daily with household bleach to prevent mold and bacteria growth.

If your child is uncomfortable and too young to blow his or her own nose, use a nasal aspirator (or bulb syringe) to remove sticky nasal fluids.

Treat fever using a non-aspirin fever medicine like acetaminophen. Aspirin should **not** be used in children with viral illnesses. Its use has been linked to Reye syndrome, a life-threatening illness.

Can RSV be prevented?

Because RSV can be easily spread by touching infected people or surfaces, washing hands well and often is key in stopping it. Wash your hands after being around someone who has cold symptoms. And school-age kids who have a cold should keep away from younger siblings — especially babies — until their symptoms pass.

To prevent serious RSV-related respiratory disease, at-risk infants can get a monthly injection of a medicine with RSV antibodies during peak RSV season (roughly November to April). The protection it gives is short-lived, though. So they'll need injections each RSV season until they're no longer at high risk for severe RSV infection. Ask the doctor if your child is considered high risk.

When should I call the doctor?

Call the doctor if your child has:
- a high fever and doesn't look well
- a thick nasal discharge
- a cough that gets worse or produces yellow, green, or gray mucus
- signs of dehydration

Also call the doctor if your infant is very cranky, or refuses to breastfeed or bottle-feed.

Get medical help right away if your child:
- has trouble breathing or is breathing very rapidly
- is very drowsy
- has lips or fingernails that look blue

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