

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

Questions and answers

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is one of the common viruses that cause coughs and colds in winter. It usually causes a mild respiratory infection in adults and children, but it can be severe in infants who are at increased risk of acute lower respiratory tract infection. RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis in children aged under 2 years. The RSV season in the UK typically begins in the autumn, earlier than the adult flu season, and runs through winter.

Who is most at risk of severe illness?

Children can be at higher risk of severe illness from common respiratory infections like RSV. Most cases are not serious and clear up within 2 to 3 weeks, but the symptoms can be very worrying for parents. For some infants and babies, such as those born prematurely or with a heart condition, respiratory infections can be more severe. Your GP can offer advice if you have concerns. It is perfectly okay for parents to ask people with colds to keep away from newborn babies, particularly in the first two months, and for babies born prematurely.

How transmissible is RSV?

RSV is a very common virus that usually spreads widely in the autumn and winter months. It is highly infectious, which is why it's important to stick to basic hand and respiratory hygiene practices to help prevent it spreading.

What was last year's season like?

Levels of respiratory illness were lower than average last year as COVID-19 restrictions gave the virus less opportunity to spread. This means that many people, especially young children will have "missed" having an infection and not developed immunity. We are seeing higher levels of RSV at the moment as restrictions ease and people mix more, and we expect levels to stay high as we progress into the autumn and winter months.

What is available in terms of medical prevention and intervention?

Good respiratory and hand hygiene practices will prevent the spread of respiratory infections such as RSV. This means washing your hands regularly, using a tissue to catch coughs or sneezes and washing your hands afterwards, and staying away from others if you feel unwell.

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Please note this is an updated version of the factsheet originally published on 9 September.

This factsheet provides information about Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), who is at risk, how to recognise and manage it, and when to seek medical help. It also covers bronchiolitis, an infection which causes the smallest airways in the lungs (the bronchioles) to become infected and inflamed. RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis in children aged under 2 years.

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Parents of young children

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