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# Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

**Last updated:** 15 January 2008

## What is RSV?

Respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, is a virus that causes respiratory infections. Illness is common in children under 2 years of age. In this age group RSV can cause bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small breathing tubes of the lung) and pneumonia (infection of the lung). Infections peak in late autumn or winter in NSW. Almost all children will have been infected by the age of 3 years, but symptoms are often only mild. Recovery from the illness results in immunity to further infection but this is not long-lasting.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms begin between 3 and 10 days after infection. Most cases are mild, with symptoms of a runny nose, cough and fever. Sometimes an ear infection can follow. Symptoms can be more severe in babies under 6 months with wheezing and shortness of breath, irritability and poor feeding.

## How is it spread?

RSV can spread easily from person to person through droplets from a sneeze or cough. People can also be infected by touching their nose or eyes after touching a person with RSV or contaminated items. A person is usually infectious for up to 10 days after symptoms begin.

## Who is at risk?

Children under the age of 3 years are at the highest risk. Babies under 6 months old, especially if they were born prematurely or have weak immune systems can have more severe infections. RSV can sometimes cause significant illness in adults, especially the elderly.

## How is it prevented?

There is no vaccine against RSV. The best prevention is good hygiene. When you have the symptoms of a cold or cough:

- cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- wash your hands regularly with soap and running water for at least 10 seconds, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose, and before touching other people
- avoid sharing cups, and eating utensils
- avoid contact with infants, the elderly and frail until you are better, and only after you have washed your hands carefully.

In hospitals, RSV can be prevented by separating RSV-infected patients from infants and others at risk, and using special infection control procedures.

Where a toy is shared among children, wash it in warm water and detergent at the end of the day or after it has been sneezed upon or mouthed. Let it dry in the sun.

Sick children should stay away from childcare until they feel well.

## How is it diagnosed?

Most children with severe RSV infection can be diagnosed by their doctor on the symptoms and signs of the illness alone. The diagnosis can be confirmed by laboratory tests for the virus in samples taken from the nose and throat, or by a blood test for antibodies to the virus.

## How is it treated?

In most cases of RSV, the body's immune system will fight off the infection. Sometimes children need to be hospitalised and treated with intravenous fluids and extra oxygen. In severe cases, intensive care may be required and an antiviral drug named ribavirin may be used. Antibiotics will not help the infection.

## What is the public health response?

RSV is not a notifiable disease. Reports from selected laboratories are monitored each winter and summarised in the NSW Health Influenza Report.

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW					
For more information please contact your doctor, local public health unit or community health centre - look under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages					
Metropolitan Areas	Location	Number	Rural Areas	Location	Number
Northern Sydney/Central Coast	Hornsby	02 9477 9400	Greater Southern	Goulburn	02 4824 1837
	Gosford	02 4349 4845		Albury	02 6080 8900
South Eastern Sydney/Illawarra	Randwick	02 9382 8333	Greater Western	Broken Hill	08 8080 1499
	Wollongong	02 4221 6700		Dubbo	02 6841 5569
Sydney South West	Camperdown	02 9515 9420		Bathurst	02 6339 5601
Sydney West	Penrith	02 4734 2022	Hunter/New England	Newcastle	02 4924 6477
	Parramatta	02 9840 3603		Tamworth	02 6767 8630
Justice Health Service	Matraville	02 9311 2707	North Coast	Port Macquarie	02 6588 2750
				Lismore	02 6620 7500

See full details of Public Health Units at [www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/infectious/phus.asp](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/infectious/phus.asp)

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