

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Infection

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is the most common cause of bronchiolitis and pneumonia among infants under one year of age. Bronchiolitis is inflammation of small air passages in the lungs and pneumonia is inflammation of the lung tissue itself. Almost all children will get RSV infection at least once by two years of age. RSV may cause respiratory disease at any age and infections may be severe among the elderly and people of any age with heart, lung or immune system problems. Infections may recur throughout life. In South Australia, infections are most common during winter and early spring.

The first symptoms are usually fever, runny nose, cough and sometimes wheezing. Ear infections are common. Pneumonia and bronchiolitis often follow, especially in infants. Most children recover from the illness in eight to 15 days, but some require hospitalisation, mostly in the very young age group below six months.

Diagnosis can be made by direct detection or isolation of the virus from respiratory secretions, or by blood tests.

RSV is spread from respiratory secretions, through close contact with infected persons or contact with contaminated surfaces. Infection occurs when material containing RSV contacts the eyes, mouth or nose. The virus survives only for a few hours outside of the body and is easily killed by soap and water or disinfectants.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

The average incubation period is 5 days, with a range of 2 – 8 days.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Uncertain, but probably from before symptoms develop until recovery from the infection. Most people recover from the infection within about 10 days.

Treatment

There is usually no need for treatment other than paracetamol for fever and maintaining adequate fluid intake. Very ill children and elderly people may require admission to hospital (less than 3% of children with RSV require this) and treatment tends to be supportive. Because RSV is a virus, antibiotics do not help. There are no safe and effective antiviral drugs for routine use for RSV.

Control of spread

- > Children with symptoms of respiratory infections should not attend school or child care until they are well.
- > There is currently no vaccine available.
- > Frequent hand washing is the most effective means of preventing spread, as the virus is easily killed by soap and water.
- > Avoid sharing cups, glasses and eating utensils with people who have respiratory infections.

> Hand Hygiene