

# RSV *in* Adults:

What Patients Need to Know about the Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)



## **What is RSV and how does it spread?**

RSV stands for respiratory syncytial virus. It is a common virus that affects the nose, throat, and lungs. It is very contagious. RSV infections usually begin to occur in the fall, are most common during the winter, and then tend to decrease during the spring. RSV is primarily spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or when people touch their face after having direct contact with a contaminated surface.

## **Who is at risk for getting severe RSV infections?**

Many people think RSV infections only affect infants and children, but older adults are also at high risk for severe RSV infections. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that every year about 6,000 to 10,000 older adults die due to their RSV infection.

Older adults, especially those 65 years and older and those with certain medical conditions, are at a higher risk of getting seriously sick from RSV infections. As adults get older, their immune system weakens, putting them at greater risk for



severe complications from RSV infections compared with younger healthy adults.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about ways to prevent getting RSV or if you have questions about symptoms.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

People who get infected with RSV generally start to show symptoms within a few days after getting exposed to the virus. Symptoms of RSV can include a runny nose, nasal congestion, coughing, sore throat, fever, and headache. These symptoms are

similar to those that can occur from other infections such as the common cold, flu, or COVID-19. The table below includes a comparison of symptoms for these different types of infections. People infected with RSV are usually contagious for about 3 to 8 days and may become contagious a day or two before they start showing signs of illness. Some adults with weakened immune systems may be contagious for longer periods of time and can continue to spread the virus for as long as 4 weeks after they stop showing symptoms.

Table 1. Symptoms of Common Respiratory Conditions

	RSV	Cold	Flu	COVID-19
Aches	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Sometimes
Difficulty breathing	Sometimes	Rarely	Rarely	Often
Fatigue	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Often
Fever	Sometimes	Rarely	Often	Sometimes
Loss of taste or smell	Rarely	Rarely	Rarely	Sometimes
Sore throat	Rarely	Often	Sometimes	Often
Wheezing	Often	Rarely	Rarely	Rarely

Courtesy of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases. Respiratory Disease Symptom Checker. [www.nfid.org/infectious-diseases/rsv/](http://www.nfid.org/infectious-diseases/rsv/)

How is RSV treated?

There are no specific treatments for RSV in adults. Most RSV infections will go away on their own, but some adults may develop more severe infections from RSV. Some older adults may develop a serious lung infection known as pneumonia. And RSV may make conditions such as asthma, COPD, or CHF worse.

For adults with mild disease, treatments that help manage symptoms can be used. Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs that contain acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be used to help manage fever or pain, and other OTC medicines can be used to help manage congestion or cough symptoms. But be sure to ask your pharmacist if these medi-

cines are safe for you to take before you use them. It is also important that adults infected with RSV stay hydrated by drinking plenty of liquids. For those with more severe symptoms, such as trouble breathing or dehydration, immediate medical care may be needed. Some patients may require hospitalization to obtain treatments such as oxygen or intravenous fluids.

You may be at a higher risk for getting really sick if infected with RSV if you:

- Are age 65 years or older
- Have Asthma
- Have Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Have Congestive heart failure (CHF)
- Have a Weakened immune system from certain conditions (for example, cancer or HIV/AIDS)
- Are taking certain medicines (for example, corticosteroids or chemotherapy)

Among adults 65 years of age and older, every year RSV infections cause:

60,000 to 160,000 hospitalizations  
6,000 to 10,000 deaths



## Are there steps I can take to help prevent the spread of RSV?

While vaccines are being studied and developed to prevent RSV, there are things everyone can do to help decrease the risk of getting RSV and avoid spreading infections to others. These include:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- Keep your hands off your face to decrease the spread of germs
- Avoid close contact with people who have cold-like symptoms
- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze
- Clean and disinfect surfaces frequently
- Stay home when you are sick because this will help protect others from getting sick

People who are infected with RSV should also consider wearing a mask to help decrease the spread of infection.

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## What you should tell your pharmacist

- Your current symptoms — when they started and how severe they are
- Your medical history — all health-related conditions you may have
- Current medicines — including all OTC and prescription drugs you take
- If anyone else in the household is sick and the severity of their symptoms

## How your pharmacist can help

- Recommend appropriate OTC medicines (based on your symptoms, medical history, and any other current medicines) to help manage:
  - Fever or pain
  - Nasal or chest congestion
  - Cough
- Refer to appropriate follow-up care if needed
- Discuss preventive measures

## References:

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