

# Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Fact Sheet

## **What is RSV?**

RSV is a virus that can cause acute respiratory tract illness in people of all ages. Most people have been infected with this virus within the first few years of life. Immunity however is not complete and reinfection is common. The infection usually occurs in late winter and early spring.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Although RSV infections may mimic the common cold, they tend to be more severe and prolonged. Bronchitis, pneumonia and influenza-like illnesses are frequent symptoms of RSV in infants and in the elderly population. Other symptoms include fever, conjunctivitis, earache, nasal congestion and cough.

## **Who is at risk?**

People of all ages are at risk. RSV is the major cause of lower respiratory tract illness in young children. In the elderly and in those with underlining medical conditions, RSV infections can involve both the upper and lower respiratory tracts and may be severe. Pneumonia can develop in 5 to 50% of elderly cases, with a fatal outcome of up to 20%.

## **What is the incubation period?**

The incubation period ranges from 2 to 8 days, most commonly 4 to 6 days.

## **When is it contagious?**

The period of infectiousness is shortly prior to and 3 to 8 days after symptoms start but may last longer in young infants where viral shedding can continue for 3 to 4 weeks.

## **How does RSV spread?**

Transmission is usually by direct contact with contaminated secretions which may involve droplets or fomites. Droplets can spread within 3 feet and expose the mucous membranes, usually the eyes or nose. You can infect yourself with hands contaminated by an ill individual.

Virus-contaminated nasal secretions can live up to 8 hours at room temperature on non-porous surfaces like rubber gloves and equipment. RSV can survive for ½ hour or more on hands and porous surfaces like paper towels and gowns.

## **How can the spread of RSV be reduced?**

In a facility, follow precautions for contact/droplet spread. A single room is ideal or cohort ill residents/clients. For direct care use gloves, masks, goggles and gowns. Change your uniform/work clothes right after work to avoid spreading the infection to your family and community.

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**What do I do if I get sick with RSV?**

- Stay home away from others.
- Rest in bed.
- Drink lots of fluids.
- Contact your doctor if treatment is required.

**Other Questions?**

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 x349.  
Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [www.hpepublichealth.ca](http://www.hpepublichealth.ca)

**References**

- Mandall, G.L., Bennett, J.E., Dolin, R., (2004). *Principles and Practices of Infectious Disease, vol.2.*
- Pickering, L.K., ed. (2003). *Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases.* Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics.
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