



Medicine for Managers

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Respiratory Syncytial Virus

We've probably all had it! By age about two, most children have already been infected with it at least once. It is not a distinctive infection, sharing symptoms with other cold and 'flu viruses. For most adults and children the symptoms that herald the infection are a runny nose and nasal congestion with a sore throat. Most infections can be managed with home remedies, but the infection can be serious for babies and adults with risk factors.

The incubation period for the infection is around four to six days after being infected, following which a variety of symptoms develop including, not only the nasal congestion and runny nose, but also a cough and sore throat, sneezing, and sometimes decreased appetite and wheezing.

Babies may run a high temperature of 39-40° Centigrade whilst most adults have only a minor fever or no raised temperature at all. These symptoms do not usually all appear together but develop in stages. For young infants the major symptom may be the difficulty breathing, together with general lethargy and irritability.

Because of the similarity of symptoms in colds, influenza and Covid-19 infections, many adults have the disease and pass it on without ever realising it is RSV. Others can spread it without having any symptoms at all.

Young infants are most at risk of severe symptoms and may need hospitalisation. The

seriousness of the infection is most associated with infection of the lower respiratory tract where the small airways become blocked with inflammation and infected fluid.

Older adults may also be at greater risk of the infection, particularly if they have:

- [A weakened immune system](#)
- [Heart or lung disease](#)
- [Other concurrent medical disorders](#)
- [The very elderly, particularly if unwell and immobile and living in elderly residential care.](#)

It is difficult to predict the sequence of events in RSV because of the variation in severity. When symptoms are present they may last for between five and ten days and, in general, the worst of the symptoms occurs on about day five of the clinical infection. They are generally resolved by day ten, although sometimes coughs may be persistent for some weeks.

Both infants and young children, and older, particularly debilitated adults may need hospitalisation, which may require in-patient care for anything up to three weeks.

Managing RSV

Anyone who suspects that they have contracted RSV should remain at home, because it is transmitted by coughing and sneezing, or by touch from contact on an infected surface.

It is important to have a thermometer at home to monitor temperature and it is most wise to remain at home or keep children from school until there has been no raised temperature for twenty-four hours.

A mainstay of treatment is the use of regular temperature-reducing medication, such as paracetamol, together with rest and regular fluid intake.

If it is essential to leave home whilst infected with RSV, it is important to:

- Avoid kissing, shaking hands, sharing food utensils with others
- Cover the face when sneezing or coughing
- Avoid touching the face and, if doing so, wash hands immediately afterwards

It is wise to wear a mask and where possible to disinfect surfaces such as door handles and work surfaces when touched.

Unfortunately, there are no antiviral medications or other treatments that reduce the duration or severity of RSV.

Even those patients, usually infants or older adults, admitted with the infection, only are treated for symptom relief such as temperature or with oxygen for respiratory distress. Difficulty with breathing may be recognised by gasping, or being unable to complete sentences.

There is a vaccine available to combat RSV infection for children, eligible adults and mothers who have given birth.

For the year 2024-25, the impact in England of the vaccine, administered to about 45% of those aged 74-79, was to reduce admissions in that group by about a third. In Scotland, the take up of the group was about 70% and admissions were reduced by nearly two-thirds.

A research organisation called RAND Europe, based in Cambridge, has reported an estimate of 11,800 adult deaths from RSV and it may contribute to other deaths as well.

Overall, RSV is a common infection, often insignificant or mild, but in vulnerable groups it may be severe and can be serious or fatal. Advice should always be obtained if signs of respiratory distress occur in any of the priority groups.

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