

RSV in Older Adults

RSV – known medically as Respiratory Syncytial Virus – is a highly contagious respiratory virus that causes seasonal outbreaks, usually during the winter months.

RSV in adults

RSV spreads easily through coughs and sneezes and is a common cause of lower respiratory tract infections.

While RSV is often associated with young children, the virus impacts people of all ages. This is because natural immunity after an RSV infection is short lived and re-infections can occur throughout life.

Who is at risk?

Adults over 60 years of age are at high risk of severe RSV infection due to the age-related decline in immunity. People with certain medical conditions are at even greater risk, including those living with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, diabetes or chronic kidney disease.

Adults with weakened immune systems are also at increased risk of severe RSV disease. Severe RSV may result in hospitalisation and even death in vulnerable adults.

RSV in at-risk adults can lead to pneumonia and may also result in the worsening of other medical conditions. For example, severe RSV may cause cardiovascular complications in people living with conditions such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, an irregular heartbeat or a history of heart attack.

Signs and symptoms – mild RSV

In adults, most cases of RSV are mild with symptoms including:

- A runny nose
- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Mild fever

When to seek medical care

Severe RSV can cause lung infections which can be dangerous for older people and can also lead to worsening of existing conditions. In adults, signs of severe RSV-related lower respiratory tract infection may include:

- A cough that is getting worse
- Shortness of breath and a greater effort to breathe
- A high fever
- Blue tint to skin
- Prolonged wheezing

RSV is too serious to delay medical care.

If you experience any of the symptoms above, see a healthcare professional urgently.

Managing RSV at home

As most cases of RSV are mild, people who are not showing signs of severe illness can treat RSV at home. Stay home and rest, keep hydrated and manage fever with light clothing, a cool cloth on the forehead and/or use of paracetamol/ibuprofen according to dosing instructions.

People with other health conditions who are impacted by RSV should use their medications as prescribed and speak to their doctor if needed.

Hospitalisation for severe RSV

RSV can cause severe lower-respiratory tract infections such as pneumonia that may require admission to hospital for supportive care, including intravenous fluids and supplemental oxygen – with ventilator support where necessary.

Because RSV can exacerbate underlying medical conditions, such as asthma or COPD, additional medical care may be needed in some cases.

RSV protection

People can help minimise the spread of RSV at home through good hygiene practices, including washing hands thoroughly, keeping a distance from people with cold-like symptoms and disinfecting personal items.

A vaccine to protect older adults against severe RSV is available overseas and has been approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in Australia. For more information, speak with your GP or visit: www.ifa.org.au/uniteagainstrsv/abouttrsv/preventingtrsv

For more information, including a range of RSV-related resources, visit: www.ifa.org.au/uniteagainstrsv