



Island County Public Health

Communicable Disease Program

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

You are being provided with this fact sheet:

- because you or your child may have been exposed to RSV.** If you believe your child has RSV, contact your healthcare provider. Notify your childcare provider or school if a diagnosis of RSV is made.
- for informational purposes only.**

What is respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms in young children. It is common and most children have had RSV by the time they are 2 years old. It can be serious, especially in infants and older adults, and is the most frequent cause of lower respiratory infections, such as bronchiolitis and pneumonia, in children under one year old. Most outbreaks occur in the winter and early spring.

What are symptoms of RSV?

Symptoms in most children and adults resemble a cold and begin with fever, runny nose, congestion, cough, and sometimes wheezing. In very young children, particularly premature infants, symptoms may include lethargy, irritability, poor feeding, and breathing difficulty. Most children recover from the illness within one to two weeks. The time between exposure and the development of symptoms is usually between two and eight days.

How is RSV spread?

RSV is spread by droplets from coughs, sneezes, drool, and runny noses. The virus can spread when a person who has RSV coughs or sneezes and another person breathes in the droplets. RSV can also spread when touching an object or surface with the virus on it and then touching the mouth, eyes, or nose. Sharing cups or utensils can also spread the virus. RSV can live on surfaces for many hours, and a person can spread RSV for weeks, even if they do not have symptoms.

Who may become ill with RSV?

Most children are infected by two years of age. Re-infection throughout life occurs and is usually associated with moderate-to-severe cold-like symptoms. Some groups are at higher risk for getting very sick or developing medical problems, including:

- Premature and very young infants (under 6 months old)
- People over 50 years old
- Pregnant people
- People with weakened immune systems or chronic health conditions

How is RSV treated?

There is no specific treatment available for RSV. Most people recover by resting and staying hydrated. There are some over-the-counter medications that can be used to relieve fever and pain. Check with your child's healthcare provider for specific recommendations. *Never give aspirin to a child*, as this has been associated with Reye's Syndrome. People with severe RSV symptoms may need to be hospitalized. If someone is showing signs of dehydration, difficulty breathing, or severe headache, they should be seen by a healthcare provider immediately.

How can RSV be prevented for those at high risk?

Contact your healthcare provider to discuss the following options:

- Infants and toddlers: There are two RSV antibody products that can help prevent severe RSV disease in infants and young children.
- Pregnant people: RSV vaccine is recommended for people who are 32-36 weeks pregnant during RSV season (usually September-January) to protect their babies from severe RSV.
- Adults: RSV vaccine is available for adults ages 60 years and older.

How can the spread of RSV be reduced?

- Make sure to use good handwashing practices, especially after sneezing, coughing, or wiping noses. Use hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available.
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Disinfect common areas and frequently touched surfaces. First, clean with soap and water. Next, disinfect with a diluted solution of chlorine bleach and water. Follow a regular schedule as the virus can live for hours on surfaces.
- Do not touch eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid sharing cups, utensils, food, and drinks with anyone who has RSV.

When does a child need to stay home from childcare or school?

A child should not attend childcare or school if one or more of the following applies:

- They have a fever (defined as temperature above 100.4°F/38°C) or are using fever reducing medication
- They have RSV symptoms described previously in this letter
- They do not feel well enough to participate in classroom activities (for example: unusually tired; cranky or fussy; crying more than usual; etc.)

Adapted from materials developed by Snohomish County Health Department and Public Health — Seattle & King County.

References

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Respiratory Syncytial Virus Infection (RSV): <https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/index.html>
- Mayo Clinic, Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV): <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/respiratory-syncytial-virus/symptoms-causes/syc-20353098>
- Child Care Health Program – Public Health Seattle & King County: <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/child-teen-health/child-care-health/disease-prevention.aspx>
- Child Care Health Outreach – Snohomish County Health Department: <https://www.snohd.org/446/Disease-Fact-Sheets-for-Child-Care-Provi>

This document was published by Island County Public Health. It is for information only and is not meant as a substitute for consultation with your healthcare provider. This document was updated in November 2025. This document is not valid after November 2026.