

Biological Hazards

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

On this page

[What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?](#)

[What occupations are at risk?](#)

[What are the symptoms of an RSV infection?](#)

[What can a workplace do to help reduce the spread of RSV?](#)

[How does RSV spread?](#)

[What precautions can workers take to](#)

[How is RSV treated?](#)

[reduce the spread of RSV?](#)

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a contagious respiratory virus. RSV infects the nose, throat, and lungs and typically causes mild symptoms similar to the [common cold](#). In certain populations, RSV can cause a serious, life threatening infection.

In Canada, RSV infections occur seasonally, usually from the fall to early spring. Most cases happen in December through March.

What are the symptoms of an RSV infection?

In most cases, symptoms of RSV are mild and may include:

- Runny nose
- Cough
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Wheezing

- Decrease in appetite

Reinfection of RSV can occur and is usually less severe than the initial infection. Some individuals are at higher risk of developing a more severe RSV infection, including individuals who are 65 years of age or older, are immunocompromised, or who have heart or lung disease. Complications include pneumonia or bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small airways in the lungs).

How does RSV spread?

RSV spreads when:

- A person who has RSV coughs or sneezes and their respiratory particles get into your eyes, nose, or mouth
- You touch a contaminated surface and then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth before washing your hands

Symptoms of RSV typically begin from 2 to 8 days after initial exposure to the virus. People with RSV are contagious for about 3 to 8 days and may be contagious a day or two before they have any symptoms.

The OSH Answers fact sheet [How Do Particulates Enter the Respiratory System?](#) provides additional information on how respiratory particles enter the respiratory system and deposit in the lungs.

How is RSV treated?

Most people infected with RSV will recover in 1 to 2 weeks without the need for medical treatment. Treatment aims to manage symptoms and includes drinking plenty of fluids and getting lots of rest.

In severe cases, treatment may include additional oxygen, IV fluids, or intubation in a hospital.

What occupations are at risk?

Although anyone can get RSV, some occupations are at an increased risk of exposure and may include but are not limited to:

- [Health care workers](#)
- [Long-term care workers](#)
- [Emergency services workers](#)

- Teachers and other staff in [schools and childcare facilities](#)
 - [Accommodation workers](#), such as in hotels, motels, hostels, and bed and breakfasts
 - [Emergency shelter workers](#)
 - Commercial aircraft cabin crew and other transportation workers
-

What can a workplace do to help reduce the spread of RSV?

RSV can be reduced in the workplace by using control measures, which may include:

- Encourage workers to stay home when they feel sick, even if their symptoms are mild
- Conduct work activities and events outdoors, when possible
- Improve [indoor ventilation](#) to decrease the concentration of RSV in the air, including upgrading existing Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems and opening windows to allow outside air in
- Do not share equipment, where possible
- Provide hand washing stations or hand sanitizer dispensers (with a minimum of 60% alcohol content) in high-traffic areas, including entrances, dining areas, and near elevators. Regularly check and restock dispensers
- Provide workers with [training](#) and education on reducing the spread of RSV in the workplace
- Provide [screening](#) of employees and visitors where there is an increased risk of infection, or in settings where individuals are at greater risk of complications such as long-term care homes
- Provide adequate supplies to [clean and disinfect](#) high-touch surfaces such as light switches, door handles, and railings regularly. Follow [sanitation and infection control](#) practices when cleaning and disinfecting
- Develop and communicate policies and procedures that clearly explain workplace procedures to prevent the spread of RSV, including a sick leave policy and an emergency response plan that explains [how to respond to a worker who is sick](#)
- Provide [personal protective equipment](#) and train all employees on the proper selection, care, inspection, use and storage of personal protective equipment

What precautions can workers take to reduce the spread of RSV?

Ways in which workers can reduce the spread of RSV include:

- Stay home and limit contact with others when you are sick, even if symptoms are mild
- Practice [proper hand hygiene](#) by washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, dispose of the tissue immediately, and wash or sanitize your hands immediately afterwards
- Wear a [mask](#) if you have symptoms of RSV and need to be around people, seasonally, and in crowded or poorly ventilated settings

Immunization may be available and appropriate for infants and individuals who are 60 years of age and older. Consult with a healthcare provider for additional information on the RSV vaccination.

Fact sheet first published: 2025-07-30

Fact sheet last revised: 2025-07-30

Disclaimer

Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.