

RSV: A Respiratory Virus in Young and Old

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[Susan Laird] Welcome to this CDC podcast on Respiratory Syncytial Virus, or RSV. I'm your host, Susan Laird. RSV is the major respiratory virus of early infancy. Most of us have had the disease by the time we're two years old, but you can get it again. In fact, RSV can cause severe respiratory illness in people 65 and older. An RSV infection causes cold-like symptoms, which may just go away on their own. But sometimes, RSV can cause serious health problems, like pneumonia or bronchiolitis. Cathy Panozzo, an epidemiologist with CDC, is joining us today to discuss RSV. Welcome to the show, Cathy.

[Cathy Panozzo] Thanks, it's great to be here.

[Susan Laird] Cathy, tell us a little about RSV.

[Cathy Panozzo] Well, RSV is a respiratory virus, and in the U.S., it's the main cause of pneumonia and bronchiolitis in children under one year of age. Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs, and bronchiolitis, which many people may not have heard of before, is an infection of the airways. Both of these can be really serious in infants and young children. RSV is also a cause of serious respiratory illness in people 65 and older, especially those that are frail. This virus exists worldwide, and, just like the flu, RSV infections occur seasonally. The RSV season varies, depending on where you live, but usually lasts from fall to spring.

[Susan Laird] So, how do we get infected with RSV?

[Cathy Panozzo] Well, RSV is very contagious and it's often brought into the home by older children who are infected with RSV. RSV can be spread by direct and indirect contact with the virus. RSV can be spread *directly* when infected people cough or sneeze droplets containing the virus into the air we breathe. RSV can be spread *indirectly* when these droplets land on commonly used objects, like toys, books, doorknobs, and countertops. Without even realizing it, you can get the virus on your hands by touching an object that has live virus on it. If you then rub your eyes or nose, you can get the virus in your body and become infected. People who are infected who don't carefully wash their hands can easily spread the virus around.

[Susan Laird] It sounds very contagious and hard to avoid. Can infection with RSV be prevented?

[Cathy Panozzo] There actually are several simple things you can do to prevent RSV infection. People, especially those who are sick or providing care, need to wash their hands. Cleaning contaminated surfaces, such as faucet handles or the TV remote control, with soap and water or a disinfectant may also decrease the spread of RSV. Unfortunately, there's no vaccine for RSV yet, but there is a drug that can help prevent serious RSV disease in some high-risk children. The drug is called palivizumab and is given as a monthly shot during the RSV season. Only a doctor can give palivizumab and tell parents if their child could benefit from it.

[Susan Laird] What symptoms should parents look for if they think their child might have RSV?

[Cathy Panozzo] Well, in general, RSV actually looks the same as many other respiratory illnesses. In infants and young children, symptoms may include fever, reduced appetite, runny nose, cough, and wheezing. In older children and adults, symptoms may include runny nose, sore throat, headache, cough, and just a feeling of general sickness. But, in people of all ages—especially infants, young children, and older adults—RSV can develop into more serious illnesses, like pneumonia and bronchiolitis.

[Susan Laird] Is there anything that can be done to make people with RSV more comfortable?

[Cathy Panozzo] Your doctor can give you suggestions about how to make people with RSV more comfortable. If you're concerned about the health of a child or adult, you should call your doctor.

[Susan Laird] Cathy, thanks for sharing this information with our listeners.

[Cathy Panozzo] Thank you for having me.

[Susan Laird] To learn more about RSV, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.

This podcast has been presented by CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.