

Staying Healthy During Respiratory Illness Season

Learn how to stay healthy this cold and flu (and RSV and EV) season.

General precautions

Respiratory illnesses are usually passed on when someone inhales droplets of saliva from a sick person sneezing, coughing or talking. They can also be transmitted through contact with infected bodily fluids on surfaces. To protect yourself:

- avoid close contact with those who are sick (kissing, hugging, sharing utensils, cups, etc.)
- wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and warm water (at least 20 seconds) or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- keep healthy habits for diet, exercise, and sleep, and drink plenty of water
- keep up-to-date on vaccinations, such as influenza and pneumonia

If your child has a ventilator and/or tracheostomy

- wash your hands prior to trach care or handling the ventilator circuit
- practice proper clean suctioning techniques
 - use gloves
 - try to avoid touching other surfaces, then touching catheter
 - saline lavage only when necessary
 - cover suction catheter with original packaging when not in use
 - change out suction catheters according to manufacturer recommendations
- ensure adequate humidity in ventilator circuit and follow DME protocol for cleaning and changing humidifier components
- keep up-to-date on age-appropriate, seasonal flu and pneumonia vaccinations
- consult with your child's doctor to see if they are a candidate for the RSV vaccine, Synagis

Types of respiratory illness

Common Cold/Rhinovirus

Signs and symptoms: sneezing, stuffy or runny nose, sore throat, coughing, watery eyes, mild headache, and/or mild body aches.

Over 200 viruses can cause cold symptoms, but the most common is rhinovirus. Symptoms are typically mild and can be managed with over-the-counter medications under the guidance of your child's doctor.

Since a cold is caused by a virus, it should not be treated with antibiotics. Symptoms usually last between 7-10 days, and patients are most contagious within the first 2-3 days of feeling sick.

Influenza (Flu)

Signs and symptoms: fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, fatigue (tiredness), vomiting, and/or diarrhea (more common in children).

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. Flu should be taken very seriously as it can be fatal if not managed carefully. Flu season can begin as early as October, usually peaks in January, and carries through to early spring. Since the flu is a viral infection, it cannot be treated with antibiotics. Symptoms can last between a few days to a few weeks, and patients are most contagious 1 day before and up to 5-7 days after feeling sick. The best protection from the flu is yearly vaccination. Talk to your child's doctor about what vaccine is right for him or her.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

Signs and symptoms: runny nose, decreased appetite, coughing, sneezing, fever, and /or wheezing.

RSV is a respiratory virus that infects the lungs and breathing passages. Although usually mild, RSV can be serious and even fatal in premature infants and children with breathing problems. Symptoms last for around several days and up to four weeks. Patients are most contagious 3-8 weeks after feeling sick. RSV cannot be treated with antibiotics. Ask your child's doctor about Synagis, a vaccine for high-risk children which protects against RSV.

Enterovirus (EV-D68)

Signs and symptoms: fever, runny nose, sneezing, coughing, muscle or body aches, shortness of breath (severe cases), and/or wheezing (severe cases).

EV-D68 is a virus that recently received increased media attention due to clusters of outbreaks across several Midwestern states, including Illinois. It is important to note that the EV-D68 strain is not known to cause heart and neurological problems. Most cases are mild, but some cases can be severe and require hospitalization. Young children and teenagers are most at risk for EV-D68 infection. EV-D68 cannot be treated with antibiotics. Cases are typically seen throughout summer and fall seasons. Patients can be contagious for up to 1-3 weeks, even without symptoms. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are NOT effective in preventing the spread of EV-D68.

Emergency Situations

Parents with high-risk children should notify the doctor if there is a change in their usual condition. Contact the doctor in the following situations:

- increased oxygen requirement, or if oxygen saturation is decreased from the normal levels
- fever above 100.4°F that does not respond to over-the-counter treatment

- wheezing
- increased respiratory rate
- increased heart rate
- increased frequency and/or need for suctioning
- retractions: skin tugging or pulling in during inspiration at the neck, above and below the rib cage, and between the ribs
- nasal flaring: nostrils spreading open while breathing
- accessory muscle use: muscles of the neck appear to be moving when your child breathes in
- changes in alertness

Certain symptoms require prompt medical attention. Contact a medical professional and go the emergency room in the following situations:

- oxygen saturation does not improve with increased oxygen delivery
- wheezing does not improve with the administration of bronchodilator treatments (Albuterol, Xopenex, puffers, etc).
- bluish, pale, or grey color is seen around the mouth, the inside of the lips, or on fingernail beds
- grunting when exhaling

This guide was prepared by our Respiratory Therapists and information available at www.cdc.gov.