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Respiratory Syncytial Virus

- Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) infection is a viral disease of the lungs. It is one of the most important causes of lower respiratory tract illness in infants and young children.
- RSV is spread by contact with droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person.
- Persons with mild infections usually get better without treatment. Severely ill children often need to be hospitalized.
- There is currently no vaccine to prevent RSV infection. The best ways to prevent the spread of RSV are to cover coughs and sneezes and to wash hands often and well.

What Is Respiratory Syncytial Virus Infection?

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) infection is one of the most important causes of lower respiratory illness in infants and young children. It also causes both mild and serious respiratory diseases in older children and adults.

What Is The Infectious Agent That Causes RSV Infection?

RSV infection is caused by the respiratory syncytial virus.

Where Is RSV Infection Found?

RSV infections occur worldwide. Most children are infected at least once by age 2 and continue to be reinfected throughout life. In temperate climates, RSV infections usually occur in the winter. Peaks occur in January and February in the United States.

How Do Children Get RSV Infection?

The virus is found in discharges from the nose and throat of an infected person. Children can get RSV infection by:

- Breathing in droplets after an infected person has coughed
- Hand-to-mouth contact after touching an infected person
- Hand-to-mouth contact with a surface that an infected person has touched or coughed on

What Are The Signs And Symptoms Of RSV Infection?

RSV infections can range from very mild illness to serious lower respiratory tract infections, including pneumonia, that occur mostly in the very young, the very old, and those with weakened immune systems. Symptoms can last for a few days to several weeks.

Signs and symptoms in young children are usually mild and similar to a cold. They include stuffy nose, cough, and sometimes ear infection. In older children and adults, RSV causes upper respiratory infection involving the nose, throat, or sinuses.

Children who develop a lower respiratory tract infection often have fever for several days, a cough that sometimes lasts more than 2 weeks, and respiratory symptoms including difficult or rapid breathing and deep coughing.

Symptoms in newborns and young infants may include irritability, listlessness, and poor feeding.

What Complications Can Result From RSV Infection?

A child with a first RSV infection can develop severe breathing problems that need to be managed in the hospital. RSV infections in premature babies less than 6 months old and in infants with chronic lung, heart, or immune problems are most likely to be severe and lead to death.

How Soon After Exposure Do Symptoms Appear?

Illness usually starts within 3 to 5 days of infection.

How Is RSV Infection Diagnosed?

There are tests for RSV infection, but the diagnosis is sometimes based on symptoms and time of year.

Who Is At Risk For RSV Infection?

People of any age can be infected. Very young infants, premature infants, and children with underlying lung, heart, or immune system problems are at high risk for severe RSV disease.

The virus can also cause serious illness in elderly persons and in adults with lung disease or weakened immune systems.

How Common Is RSV Infection?

RSV is the leading cause of lower respiratory tract illness in infants and young children. In the United States, approximately 50% of infants and young children become infected with RSV each winter season.

What Complications Can Result From RSV Infection?

Infants and young children with a first RSV infection can develop a severe infection in the lower respiratory tract.

Approximately 90,000 children are hospitalized with these infections each year and 4,500 deaths per year in children under age 5 years.

Most children needing hospitalization are newborns and infants and those with weak immune systems, congenital heart or lung disease, or prematurity.

What Is The Treatment For RSV Infection?

Most children with mild RSV infections usually get better without treatment. Care of children with mild illness centers on relieving symptoms and easing breathing.

Those with more serious infections are sometimes treated in the hospital with the anti-virus drug ribavirin. Some hospitalized patients need intensive care and mechanical ventilation (respirator).

How Can RSV Infection Be Prevented?

There is currently no RSV vaccine. The best ways to prevent the spread of RSV are to cover coughs and sneezes, wash hands often and thoroughly, and dispose of used tissues properly.

Synagis, a monoclonal antibody (intramuscular injection) and IVIG, an immune globulin (intravenous treatment) are used to prevent RSV infection in high-risk infants.

This information should not be used as substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician. Health related topics found on the Andorra Pediatrics web site should not be used for diagnosing purposes or be substituted for medical advice. As with any new or ongoing treatment, always consult your professional healthcare provider before making any changes in treatment or beginning any new treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please call our office.