Fact Sheet: Respiratory Syncytial Disease (RSV)

What is RSV?

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is a virus that causes seasonal epidemics of respiratory illness in countries around the world. In Canada, elevated RSV activity generally takes place from late fall to early spring.

RSV is one of the most common respiratory viruses in infants and young children. Most children will have at least one RSV infection by the age of 2 years. It is common for people to catch RSV multiple times throughout their life. Repeat infections are often milder. While anyone can get RSV, individuals in the following groups tend to experience severe RSV infection more than others:

- infants and children under 2 years of age
- children with congenital heart disease or neuromuscular disorders
- adults and children with chronic lung or heart disease, or weakened immune systems
- older adults

In severe cases, RSV requires hospitalization and may be life-threatening. In children, hospitalization rates are highest among children under 1 year, and especially within the first 2 months of life. In adults, hospitalization is highest in older adults and those with certain chronic medical conditions.

How is RSV spread?

Humans are the only source of infection. RSV enters your body through your mouth, eyes, and nose through infected droplets. It is spread through close contact with infected individuals (e.g., when an infected person coughs or sneezes near you), by sharing personal items, such as drinks, or through contact with contaminated surfaces.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

RSV infects the lungs and airways. It causes cold-like symptoms and is the most common cause of bronchiolitis, an inflammation of the small airways in the lungs and pneumonia in young infants and toddlers.

Symptoms may include:

- runny nose
- cough
- sneezing
- headache
- fever
- wheezing
- sore throat
- fatigue
- bronchiolitis

In infants, the only symptoms of RSV may be decreased activity, difficulty breathing, difficulty feeding and/or irritability.

How is RSV treated?
Most healthy individuals will recover on their own in 1 to 2 weeks. The best management for RSV is to treat symptoms.

- Drink plenty of fluids and adequate rest.
- Over-the-counter medications, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, can be given to relieve the symptoms associated with RSV, such as fever and headache.

Some people with RSV infection, especially infants younger than two years of age and older adults, may need to be hospitalized if they are having trouble breathing or are dehydrated.

How is RSV prevented?
For adults 18 years and older, there are vaccines approved to prevent RSV disease. These products cannot be used to treat individuals who already have RSV disease.

Monoclonal Antibody (mAb) medication (nirsevimab) is available for neonates and infants entering or in their first RSV season.

The most effective ways to prevent transmission of RSV:

- stay home when ill
- wash your hands often
- clean surfaces in your home that are touched often
- cough or sneeze into your sleeve