Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

What is Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)?
RSV is a virus that causes infections in the lungs and breathing airways. It can infect people of all ages. It is most common in children under 1 year old. In adults and older children, the infection is mild. In younger children with certain conditions and adults over 65 years old, the infection may be severe. Each year, many children less than 1 year old spend time in the hospital due to RSV. Most children will get a mild RSV infection before they turn 2. Only a small percentage will get a severe infection.

How is RSV spread?
If an infected person coughs or sneezes, droplets carrying the virus will enter the air. RSV enters the body through the eyes, nose, or mouth. You may become infected by breathing in the droplets or coming in contact with them. The virus can live for hours on objects such as countertops and toys. An RSV-infected person can be contagious for 3 to 8 days, and up to 4 weeks if they have a weak immune system.

Who can get a severe RSV infection?
People who have a higher chance of getting a severe RSV infection include:

- Children less than 1 year old who were born prematurely
- Children less than 2 years old who have heart or lung disease
- Adults more than 65 years old
- Adults or children with weakened immune systems.

When is the chance for infection the greatest?
RSV infections are most common in the United States from November to April. However, the timing of the RSV season may not be the same for all locations and for every year.
How do you avoid getting RSV and prevent the spread of RSV?\(^1\)

Currently, there is no vaccine for RSV. There are some ways you can prevent the spread of RSV:

- Cover your coughs and sneezes when you have cold-like symptoms
- Wash your hands often. Wash for 15-20 seconds with soap and warm water
- Avoid people who have fevers or colds
- Clean surfaces that may be infected, including toys
- Do not share drinking glasses with others.

If your child has a higher chance of getting a severe infection, you should pay attention to prevent your child from RSV. When possible, limit the time that your child spends in child-care centers to avoid being infected.

How do I know if my child has RSV?\(^1\)

If your child is less than 1 year old and was born prematurely or less than 2 years old with a heart or lung disease, it’s important to see a doctor if you think your child has an RSV infection. Only a doctor can tell if your child has RSV. The symptoms of an RSV infection are like a common cold:

- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Low-grade fever
- Decreased appetite

Call your doctor right away if you notice severe RSV symptoms such as:

- Severe coughing
- Wheezing
- Fast or difficulty breathing
- High fever
- Bluish skin color

How do you treat RSV?\(^1\)

In most cases, the infection should get better on its own in 1–2 weeks. In severe cases, your child may have to stay in the hospital to get fluids and oxygen. Your doctor may also give your child medicines to help with breathing.

Your doctor may recommend a medicine called Synagis® for children who have a higher chance of getting a severe RSV infection. For children less than 1 year old who were born prematurely or less than 2 years old with a heart or lung disease, Synagis will help prevent a severe infection when your child gets RSV.
What is Synagis (palivizumab)?

Synagis is a medicine used to help an RSV infection from becoming severe. It’s given as a shot into a muscle. It does not prevent your child from getting an RSV infection. Synagis is not a vaccine. Synagis works by giving the body virus-fighting substances called antibodies. Your child may still get an RSV infection so it is important to look for symptoms and get each shot on time.

How long is Synagis therapy?

The length of Synagis treatment will depend on your child’s chances of getting RSV. The American Academy of Pediatrics has guidelines for who should get Synagis and how long to give it. Some children may get Synagis once a month for up to 5 months, but many will need fewer doses. If your child has a higher chance of getting RSV, your doctor will decide if your child needs to get Synagis and for how long.

What are the side effects of Synagis?

Common side effects include feeling warmth, redness, swelling, or discomfort around the area of the shot. These side effects are usually mild and should get better on their own. Talk to your doctor to see if you can give your child acetaminophen (Tylenol) to help with these side effects.

Contact your doctor right away if your child has severe side effects. These include:
- Allergic reactions – Symptoms include:
  - Rash, hives, or itching skin
  - Hard time breathing
  - Hard to swallow
  - Swelling of the lips, tongue, or face
  - Bluish color skin, lips, or under fingernails
  - Feeling weak
  - Not responding
- Unusual bruising
- Groups of tiny red spots on the skin

What if my child becomes infected with RSV while taking Synagis?

It is possible to get an RSV infection while on Synagis. Look for symptoms of infection. Tell your doctor right away if you see any symptoms. Your child will still need to get their Synagis injections to prevent the infection from becoming severe.
Where can I get more information?

For more information, please contact the following resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Phone: 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
Website: www.cdc.gov/rsv/

American Academy of Pediatrics
Phone: 1-847-434-4000
Website: http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/default.aspx

MedImmune, Inc.
Phone: 1-888-371-6334
Website: www.rsvprotection.com
Website: www.synagis.com

National Institutes of Health, MedLinePlus
8600 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20894
Website: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001564.htm

References:

The information in this handout doesn’t replace the medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment provided by your doctor. Always ask your doctor or a qualified health provider if you have any questions about your medical condition.