

Preventing Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) in Infants

Fact Sheet for Parents, Expectant Parents and Caregivers



Most children with RSV can be safely treated at home. However, it's crucial to know when to seek emergency medical care.

Take your baby to the hospital if they:

- are **having trouble breathing** (working hard to breathe, breathing faster than normal, pale or bluish skin or lips)
- have signs of **dehydration** (no tears when crying, dry or sticky mouth, weight loss, extreme thirst, fewer wet diapers than usual)
- have **worsening symptoms**

What is RSV?

Respiratory syncytial virus, commonly known as RSV, is a highly contagious respiratory infection that affects the lungs and airways. It can lead to serious lung infections such as **bronchiolitis** or **pneumonia**.

Children who get an RSV infection will often have mild illness and will recover within a week or two without the need for medical attention. But for some infants, RSV can result in severe infections requiring hospitalization, and may lead to longer-term health issues. This can place significant strain on families and the healthcare system.

- RSV is a leading cause of hospitalizations in infants under age 1, and in rare cases can be life-threatening. Most RSV hospitalizations are in otherwise healthy infants.
- Nearly all children are infected with RSV at least once by the age of 2
- RSV is typically most active during from late fall to early spring

Why are infants at risk from RSV?

- Young infants, especially those under 6 months of age, are at higher risk of severe illness from RSV because they do not yet have fully developed lungs and immune systems
- Children up to 2 years of age who have certain health conditions, such as prematurity, congenital heart disease, chronic lung conditions, or Down syndrome, are also at higher risk

What are the symptoms of RSV?

For most children, RSV symptoms are mild and similar to a cold. They include:

- coughing
- runny nose
- fever
- wheezing
- decrease in appetite and energy
- irritability

The best protection is to prevent RSV infection in young infants, until their lungs and immune systems have matured and are better able to fight infection. Fortunately, there is now a simple one-dose preventive treatment available that can protect infants' lungs during their first RSV season.

See the next page to learn more about the preventive treatment.

Protect your infant from severe RSV illness with a simple and highly effective preventive treatment.

A maternal vaccine is also available

Individuals who are between 32 to 36 weeks pregnant and who will deliver near the start of or during the RSV season can opt to have a maternal vaccine (Abrysvo®). The vaccine helps them produce antibodies that are passed on to their baby, providing their newborn with protection for up to 6 months.

Generally, only one treatment option (infant antibody treatment or maternal vaccine) is recommended to protect your baby from RSV.

According to recommendations from Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), **the infant preventive antibody treatment (Beyfortus) is the preferred option** over the maternal vaccine. This is based on its effectiveness, the immediacy and duration of protection it provides to the baby, and how safe it is. Please consult your healthcare provider if you are considering the maternal RSV vaccine.

A preventive antibody treatment that can help protect infants from RSV is now available. The preventive treatment (nirsevimab, or **Beyfortus**®) requires just a single dose and is highly effective. Starting in October 2024, it will be available free of charge in Ontario to:

- Infants born in 2024 before the RSV season
- Infants born during the 2024/25 RSV season
- High-risk children up to 24 months of age who have certain chronic conditions

If you have questions about your child's eligibility, please ask your healthcare provider.

How does it work?

Beyfortus is a "monoclonal antibody" treatment. Monoclonal antibodies are proteins that act like the antibodies your body makes to protect you from harmful germs. The monoclonal antibodies in Beyfortus recognize and target the RSV virus to help prevent severe illness in infants and young children if they're exposed to RSV.

- Protection is immediate and lasts for at least 6 months, when infants are most vulnerable to severe illness from RSV
- The treatment is only needed once, as it gives an infant's lungs and immune system enough time to mature and be more able to fight off RSV on their own during future RSV seasons
- It should be given just before or during active RSV season (typically November to April)
- It is given by injection, preferably at birth. It can also safely be given at the same time as other seasonal or childhood vaccines
- It is very safe with minimal side effects that are generally mild and short-lived. These can include redness, swelling and pain at the injection site, rash, and/or fever.

Where to get the free RSV protective antibody treatment (Beyfortus) for your infant

Beyfortus will be available through hospitals, primary care offices, obstetricians, and some public health units (depending on location). Speak to your healthcare provider to discuss the best location and timing for your infant to receive the protective RSV treatment.

Have questions? Talk your healthcare provider today.



Breathe Easy

Protect Little Lungs from RSV.

Learn more about RSV and how to protect your infant at Ontario.ca/RSV