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Experts urge vigilance with RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) ahead of winter – it’s as serious in older adults as it is in babies

- RSV is a common, contagious respiratory virus^{1,2} that can lead to significant health issues in older adults including pneumonia and hospitalisations.^{1,3-5}
- Compared with children under 5 years, older adults hospitalised with RSV may spend twice as long in hospital.³
- Fatalities from RSV are nearly 4 times higher in older adults compared with young children under 5.⁴
- Following hospitalisation from RSV, older adults may have long-term health complications and loss of independence.⁵⁻⁷

Australian experts are urging greater RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) vigilance and awareness among older adults, particularly grandparents caring for young grandchildren, ahead of the winter season. While RSV is recognised for its potential seriousness in young babies,^{1,8} the virus can also cause significant health issues in older adults including pneumonia and hospitalisations.^{1,3-5}

“We know older adults are familiar with influenza – but less aware of RSV and the serious health challenges this infectious respiratory virus can cause. We really want older Australians, particularly those caring for grandchildren, to become much more informed and aware of RSV. They need to know about their risk and not assume it’s just a problem in babies,” states Professor Lucy Morgan, Sydney Respiratory Physician and Chair of the Lung Foundation.

RSV is a common, infectious respiratory virus^{1,2} that generally peaks in autumn and winter but can occur all year round.^{9,10} By the age of two nearly every child - and therefore every grandchild - will have had RSV at least once.¹¹ Infected individuals can stay contagious for up to 10 days,^{12,13} placing older Australians, notably those caring for young children, at risk of RSV and the adverse health consequences that can result.^{3-5,14}

Although often mild,^{1,15} for older adults the RSV virus carries¹ a similar risk to influenza in causing serious illness.¹⁵ RSV can result in hospital stays for older adults lasting on average 6 days (range 4-9 days).³ Compared with children under 5 years, older adults hospitalised with RSV may spend twice as long in hospital and fatalities from the virus are nearly 4 times higher.⁴

“Hospitalisations from RSV are significant for older adults. Worryingly, this virus can also cause ongoing challenges in older Australians in the year following infection, such as increasing the level of frailty and reducing a person’s independence. It’s time for us to have RSV firmly on our health radar,” adds Professor Morgan.

Following hospital stays for RSV, older adults may experience long-term health complications, need increased care, and feel a loss of independence.^{6,7}

Associate Professor and Senior Geriatrician Michael Woodward, says: “The impact of RSV can be very serious for older Australians who may struggle to regain their health and conditioning after the virus has cleared. Unfortunately, some may have significant delays in regaining their former health and independence after RSV.”

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Clinical Professor John Blakey, Consultant Respiratory Physician and Medical Advisor to Asthma Australia said, “Older adults with existing heart or lung disease are at higher risk of being admitted with RSV: they are 5 to 10 times more likely to end up in hospital. People with conditions like asthma and COPD therefore need to be particularly aware of RSV and how to minimise their risk.”

RSV generally starts with mild symptoms, similar to other respiratory viruses such as influenza and COVID-19, including cough, headache, tiredness, runny nose and congestion.^{1,8,17} RSV can survive on hard surfaces for up to 6 hours¹ and is easily spread, including between family members of all ages.^{1,14,18}

Australia commenced recording of RSV cases under the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System in 2021.¹⁹ The tracking is beginning to build a picture of the real numbers and impact of the virus.^{20,21} For older Australians, last year’s reported RSV cases were 32,156, compared with 56,561 influenza cases.^{*21}

Older Australians are being urged to become more informed and alert to RSV ahead of winter, especially when caring for young grandchildren, and talk to their doctor or pharmacist about RSV and prevention options.

Ends

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*Notifications in patients 60 years and over, 2024.²¹

About RSV

Although often mild,^{1,15} RSV can cause serious illness and in rare cases, even death, in older adults.³⁻⁵ Older adults with certain chronic medical conditions, including asthma, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and congestive heart failure have a greater risk of being hospitalised from RSV compared with those without these conditions.²¹ Symptoms of RSV can include cough, headaches, tiredness, runny nose and congestion.^{1,4,8}

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