

MEDIA RELEASE

8 July 2021

RSV and other viruses: Public health advice and hospital visitor restrictions

All information can be attributed to Dr Nick Baker, Chief Medical Officer, Nelson Marlborough Health

Nelson Marlborough, like other regions in New Zealand, is experiencing an increase in respiratory illness amongst pre-school aged children and infants.

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is one of the causes of illness that has been identified. Like rhinovirus that causes colds, RSV is a common virus that affects all age groups but is especially severe for infants less than one year old, for older people and people who are immunocompromised. It is very infectious and can easily pass from person to person through coughing and sneezing. For older children and adults it typically causes a worse-than-average cold.

People infected with RSV are usually contagious for five to eight days. It is most easily spread from people who are coughing and sneezing a lot and are in the earlier stages of the illness. However, some infants and people with weakened immune systems may spread the virus for longer so they need to be very careful not to mix with infants under one and vulnerable people, while they are still infectious with symptoms.

RSV and other respiratory infections: What we are seeing and how we are responding

Between 30 June and 7 July	Wairau Hospital	Nelson Hospital
Number of children aged 0-5 presenting to ED with upper respiratory tract infections – caused by RSV and other viruses	24 presentations	48 presentations
Number of aged 0-5 admitted to hospital with upper respiratory tract infections – caused by RSV and other viruses	7 admissions	14 admissions

An increase in respiratory illness is normal for this time of year. However, we would not be surprised to see an increase in seriously-unwell infants this year, compared to 2018 and 2019, due to the fact that children under the age of two were not exposed to many viruses last year because of the 2020 lockdowns and closed borders. This means that they have had less chance to develop immunity and might be affected more by viruses.

We have established infection prevention processes to prevent the spread of infectious illnesses in our hospitals, such as provisions to make an isolation ward. In our children's wards the majority of rooms are single rooms to allow the management of infectious viruses.

Nelson and Wairau hospitals are currently restricting visitor access to children's wards and special care baby units, to help protect vulnerable infants and children. Our advice to people intending to visit someone in hospital is:

- do not visit if you are unwell and wait until you have been symptom-free for 48 hours before visiting

- phone ahead before you visit to check that wards are admitting visitors: Call the ward, or phone our main line on and ask to be put through to the ward you want to visit: 03 546 1824

If you have a hospital appointment and are unwell, please phone ahead and let the relevant department know. They will discuss your options with you. If you have symptoms and must go near others, phone ahead to let the ward know, wear a face mask during your visit, wash your hands thoroughly before entering the hospital and try to avoid touching too many things.

RSV symptoms and what to do if you have them

RSV symptoms include a runny nose, decrease in appetite, coughing, sneezing, fever (often mild) and/or wheeze. In some cases, it can cause more serious illness such as bronchiolitis (narrowing of airways in infants) and pneumonia. Very young infants (especially premature babies and those exposed to smoking), older adults and those with chronic medical conditions are more at risk.

- If you have RSV-like symptoms and are concerned or are getting worse, you should contact your GP or Healthline (0800 611 116) for assessment and advice.
- Early medical advice is especially important for those with underlying medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, cancer, heart and lung disease and some autoimmune diseases, or for severely overweight people and pregnant women.
- Do not return to childcare, school or work until your symptoms have resolved.

When to seek urgent advice

Parents and caregivers should seek urgent medical advice if a child has symptoms and also:

- is under three months old
- is breathing fast, noisily or is having to use extra effort to breathe
- looks pale and unwell
- is taking less than half their normal feeds
- is vomiting
- has not had a wet nappy for more than six hours

Parents and caregivers should call 111 for an ambulance if a child:

- has blue lips and tongue
- has severe difficulty breathing
- is becoming very sleepy and not easy to wake up
- is very pale
- is floppy
- has breathing that is not regular, or pauses in breathing

How to prevent the spread of RSV and other viruses

- Keep children home when they are unwell; they should not attend day-care centres or kindergarten
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue
- Regularly wash hands with soap and water for at least twenty second and dry them thoroughly.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- People with underlying medical conditions who are at increased risk of complications are strongly encouraged to avoid contact with sick people and have good hand washing practices.
- If correctly worn, masks are valuable to both prevent spread from infected people and reduce the risk of getting infected if you are close to people who may be infectious

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