Know the FACTS

Respiratory Viruses

Respiratory viruses affect your lungs, nose and throat. The most common illnesses caused by respiratory viruses are influenza A/B ("the flu"), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and COVID-19. Many people recover from respiratory illnesses within 1-2 weeks, with some symptoms lingering, but these infections also carry risks for severe illness that could last longer and require serious medical care.

How Do Respiratory Viruses Spread?

Respiratory viruses spread when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks or exhales virus-loaded droplets or particles. People become sick after inhaling those particles or touching the surfaces where they land, like countertops, door handles and even someone's skin.

Respiratory viruses cause infection all year long but spread widely during the fall and winter, when people spend time together indoors in homes, schools, offices and public spaces.

Who's at Risk for Respiratory Illnesses?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), **respiratory illnesses typically are among the top 10 causes of death in the United States.** The CDC adds that from 2024 to 2025, an estimated 1 million Americans were hospitalized with a respiratory illness and more than 70,000 died from one.

Anyone can catch a respiratory virus and develop a severe respiratory illness, including people who are healthy, young or physically active. **Some people have additional risks**:

- Pregnant people
- Infants and children aged 5 and under
- Adults aged 65 and older
- People with additional health issues:
  - Asthma
  - Diabetes
  - Disabilities or disorders
  - Chronic heart, kidney or lung disease
  - A weakened immune system from HIV, cancer or organ transplantation

Respiratory illnesses are particularly dangerous for infants and young children, whose immune systems are still in development. Viruses can severely threaten their small lungs and airways and make it extremely difficult to breathe; they may need hospitalization and significant medical care to recover.

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Can You Prevent Respiratory Illnesses?

The American Medical Association and other healthcare professionals say that **for most people, annual immunizations are the best way to protect against respiratory illnesses like the flu, RSV and COVID-19**. Vaccines are reviewed and updated for the latest viral mutations each year.

Immunizations also reduce the severity of symptoms if you do develop an illness. Vaccines don't guarantee avoiding a respiratory illness, but they significantly lessen someone's chances of becoming severely ill, needing hospitalization or dying.

Immunizations are available from physicians, clinics, pharmacies and other healthcare providers year-round, but healthcare professionals strongly recommend that most people get the vaccines each fall as the indoor season begins. **It takes about two weeks to build full immunity and become fully effective.**

Additional ways to reduce risk of illness:

- Stay home if you feel sick.
- Wash your hands frequently with water and soap.
- Fully cover your coughs and sneezes.
- Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces.
- Circulate fresh air by opening windows or using an air purifier.

What Are Common Symptoms of Respiratory Illnesses?

The flu, RSV and COVID-19 all cause similar symptoms, including a runny nose, sore throat, cough, headache, congestion, and loss of appetite. Additional symptoms include fever, aches, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, and wheezing.

Because these symptoms overlap all three illnesses, it can be difficult to determine which respiratory illness you have. If your symptoms are persistent or severe, your healthcare provider can perform tests to diagnose you and provide a treatment plan.

See a healthcare provider immediately if these symptoms develop:

- Difficulty breathing, especially for infants and children
- Decrease in activity, especially for infants and children
- Bluish skin
- Chest pain
- Confusion
- Severe vomiting
- Sudden dizziness

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About Influenza

Influenza A and B are responsible for what we know as the flu. In addition to the common respiratory symptoms, people who have the flu often experience body aches, severe fatigue, and fever of 100°F or higher.

Healthcare providers may prescribe antiviral drugs to prevent or treat severe flu. People infected with the flu can feel very ill for anywhere from a few days to two weeks. Some people die from complications caused by the flu.

About Respiratory Syncytial Virus

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) causes acute respiratory infection and can be life-threatening for infants and older adults. Infants and toddlers can experience difficulty breathing or pauses in breathing, which may require mechanical ventilation. **For children under one year old, RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis and pneumonia**.

There is no treatment for RSV, but over-the-counter medications, plenty of fluids and home actions like standing in a steamy shower can provide comfort. Hospitalization may be required to treat severe symptoms, and dehydration is a significant risk.

About COVID-19

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) can affect anyone and may be mild or severe. Symptoms typically show 2-14 days after catching the virus. People who are pre-symptomatic for COVID-19 or who show no symptoms during their illness still can spread the virus to others.

Lab tests and home test kits can confirm if you have COVID-19. Prescription drugs are available to treat COVID-19 but work best when taken in the first 5-7 days of symptoms. People with very mild cases or who are not at risk for serious illness may be able to manage symptoms with over-the-counter medications.

Additional Resources

- **Ohio Department of Health:** bit.ly/ODH-Immunization
- **American Medical Association:** bit.ly/AMA-Vaccine-Recommendations
- **American Academy of Pediatrics:** bit.ly/AAP-Immunization-Schedules

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