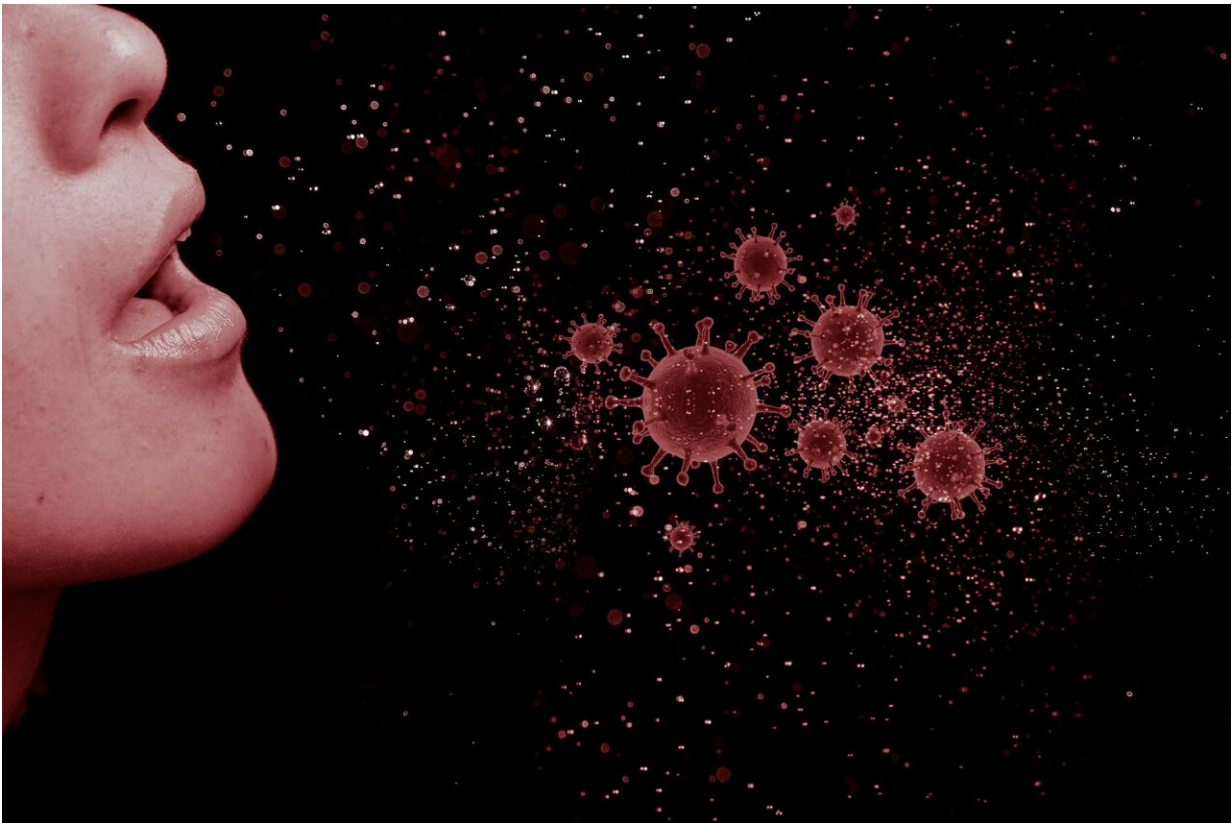


What exactly is RSV? A doctor explains symptoms, treatments and how it spreads

December 22 2022, by Kimberly Cataudella



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The News & Observer spoke with Dr. David Weber, associate chief medical officer at UNC Medical Center and medical director of UNC's Department of Infection Prevention, to learn more about RSV, a

common virus affecting many this fall and winter.

Here's what to know about RSV's symptoms, [recovery time](#), treatments and more.

What is RSV?

RSV stands for [respiratory syncytial virus](#). It's a common virus that typically runs through the region from December to February. (This year, the season began in October and was already starting to decline by the holidays.)

Anyone can catch and get sick from RSV, but it's particularly a problem in [premature infants](#) and older adults. Most who catch it will recover in about a week.

The infection and death rate for RSV looks similar to the flu, so it is an illness to be taken seriously, Dr. Weber said.

How can you catch RSV?

RSV is a droplet-spread disease through environmental transmission. The virus thrives in [lower temperatures](#) with low humidity—our current wintertime environment.

"If you rub your nose then touch something in the house, then I touch that same spot and rub my nose, I have a high chance of picking up RSV," Dr. Weber said.

RSV is most commonly spread through coughing and sneezing.

People infected with RSV are typically contagious for three to eight

days. The virus can survive on surfaces for up to six hours (but household disinfectants can kill it).

Practice good hygiene habits, including frequent hand-washing and home sanitizing.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

The illness usually starts with symptoms of a common cold, said UNC Health pediatrician Dr. Ricardo Baler. This can include:

- Congestion
- Runny nose
- Decreased appetite
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Headache (seen as irritability in [young children](#))
- Wheezing
- Sore throat

"It usually starts as a cold with a [runny nose](#), [nasal congestion](#) and cough, and by day three or four the patient may have some wheezing and symptoms or signs of respiratory distress," Dr. Baler said in a UNC Health Talk blogpost.

"They may not be able to eat because their respiratory rate is elevated, and they have trouble breathing."

How long does it take to recover from RSV? Should you see a doctor?

Healthy children and adults will recover from RSV in about a week without needing [prescription medication](#). Staying well hydrated is the most important step to recovery.

Providers may recommend a breathing treatment with albuterol, which is administered via a nebulizer to get the medication into the lungs. About 2% of patients need to be admitted to the hospital for more intensive treatment, Dr. Baler said.

UNC says to call your doctor immediately if your child has RSV symptoms and:

- Is younger than six months
- Was born prematurely
- Has a chronic respiratory condition or
- Has a weakened immune system

Is there an RSV vaccine?

There's currently no vaccine to prevent RSV. Two companies are testing some vaccines right now that may be FDA-approved for [older adults](#) by mid-2023, Dr. Weber said. It'll take longer to get these approved for children.

Though there isn't a vaccine, there are antibody treatments that are especially effective for young infants, Dr. Weber said. High-risk children may be administered this medication once a month during RSV season to help prevent the virus.

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