Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Respiratory Viral Infections

This information explains what respiratory (RES-pih-ruh-TOR-ee) viral infections are, signs and symptoms of an infection, and how they spread. It also explains how to prevent and treat an infection.

What are respiratory viral infections?

Respiratory (RES-pih-ruh-TOR-ee) viral infections are infections in the upper airway. This includes the nose, throat, or sinuses. These infections are caused by a virus. They can be serious for people who have a weakened immune system or another illness.

Viruses that cause respiratory infections include:

- Influenza (the flu)
- Respiratory syncytial (sin-SIH-shul) virus (RSV)
- Rhinovirus or enterovirus (EN-teh-roh-VY-rus)
- COVID-19 and other coronaviruses
- Rhinovirus or enterovirus (EN-teh-roh-VY-rus)
- Adenovirus (A-den-oh-VY-rus)

- Human metapneumovirus (meh-TA-NOO-moh-VY-rus)
- Parainfluenza (PAYR-uh-IN-floo-EN-zuh) virus

Signs and symptoms of respiratory viral infections

If you have a respiratory viral infection, you may have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- Cough.
- Breathing problems, such as shortness of breath or chest tightness.
- Sore throat.
- Runny or congested (stuffy) nose.
- Loss of taste or smell (common with COVID-19).
- Chills.
- Headache.
- Body or muscle aches.
- Fatigue (feeling very tired or having little energy).
- Nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up) or vomiting (throwing up) (more common with COVID-19).
- Diarrhea (loose or watery bowel movements) (more common with COVID-19).

Symptoms of respiratory virus infection can start as early as 1 day to up to 2 weeks after you're exposed to the virus. Your symptoms may range from mild to severe. They may last for 1 to 3 weeks.

Some people may have no symptoms but can still spread the virus. This is very common with COVID-19. It can also happen with other respiratory virus infections.

How respiratory viral infections spread

Respiratory viral infections spread through contact with droplets or secretions from the nose and throat of someone who is infected. The droplets go into the air when a person breathes, coughs, sneezes or talks. These droplets contain the virus. You can easily inhale (breathe in) the droplets and get an infection.

Respiratory viral infections can also spread when droplets fall onto frequently touched surfaces. These are such things as doorknobs and handles, furniture, equipment, or other surfaces. If you touch the surface and then your nose, mouth, or eyes, you may get infected.

How to stop a respiratory viral infection from spreading

While you're in the hospital

Isolation precautions are steps we take to stop infections from spreading from person to person. If you have a respiratory viral infection while you're in the hospital, your care team will more you to a private room.

Staff and visitors

We will put a sign on your door telling all staff and visitors to follow these steps when caring for you:

- All staff and visitors must wear a mask, eye protection, gown, and gloves before entering your room.
- All staff and visitors must wear these items while they are in your room. They must discard these inside your room before they leave.
- All staff and visitors must clean their hands again after leaving your room.

You can have art or massage therapy in your room while following isolation precautions.

Leaving your room

If you leave your room for tests, you must wear a mask, gown, and gloves. While you're on isolation precautions,

do not use any other public areas, such as:

- Main lobby
- Hospital cafeteria
- Visitors lounges
- Inpatient unit

You will not be able to walk around your unit. You also cannot go to:

- The pantry on your unit.
- The pediatric recreation areas on M9.
- The Teen Lounge (TYA Lounge) on M14.

Your healthcare provider will tell you when you can stop following these precautions. This is usually when you receive treatment and can no longer pass the infection to others.

While you're at home

Follow the instructions in this section to help prevent the spread of respiratory infections to others in your home and community.

- Stay home if you are sick. Avoid doing anything outside your home except getting medical care.
    - Do not go to work, school, or other public areas.

    - Avoid using public transportation, ride-sharing services, and taxis.
    - If you need medical care, call your healthcare provider first to tell them you're coming.
    - Avoid close contact or wear a mask when around others, especially those at a high risk of severe infection
- Wash your hands often. Clean your hands right away after you cough, sneeze or blow your nose.
    - If you're washing your hands with soap and water, wet your hands and apply soap. Rub your hands together well for at least 20 seconds, then rinse. Dry your hands with a paper towel and use that same towel to turn off the faucet. If you do not have paper towels, it's OK to use clean cloth towels. Replace them when they're wet.
    - If you're using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, be sure to cover all parts of your hands with it. Rub your hands together until they're dry.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your elbow when you cough or sneeze. Avoid sneezing into your hands.
- Avoid sharing personal items like cups, utensils, or towels.

- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces in your home.
    - At least once a day, clean and disinfect the objects and surfaces you touch often. Examples of objects include phones, tablets, remote controls, and keyboards. Examples of surfaces include doorknobs, bathroom fixtures, toilets, counters, tabletops, and bedside tables.
    - Wash used dishes, cups, and eating utensils well with soap and hot water or in a dishwasher.
    - Keep your dirty laundry in a laundry bag. Do not shake your dirty laundry. Wash it following the instructions on the label using the warmest water setting you can. Dry it well. Use the hot setting, if you can. It's OK to mix your laundry with other laundry.
- Bring in fresh air by opening windows or using air purifiers.
- Ask family and close contacts to stay up to date with recommended vaccinations, including the flu and COVID-19 vaccines.

How to manage your symptoms at home

It's helpful to keep a daily journal of your symptoms and the medicine you take to manage them. This will help you

see how your symptoms are changing over time. This can be useful if you need to contact or visit your healthcare provider.

Talk with your healthcare provider if you use a CPAP machine, another device for sleep apnea, or a home nebulizer. These things may spread the viruses that causes respiratory infections. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for using them while you have an infection.

Take over-the-counter medicine

Over-the-counter medicine is medicine you can buy without a prescription.

- You can use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) to help treat fever, body aches, and headaches.
  - Do not take more than 3 grams (g) of acetaminophen in 1 day. Taking too much can harm your liver.
  - Acetaminophen is a very common ingredient in over-the-counter and prescription medicine. Always read the label on the medicine you're taking. Sometimes, the full name acetaminophen is not written out. It could be written out as APAP, AC, N-acetyl-para-aminophenol, or paracetamol.
- Over-the-counter cold medicine can help if you're coughing, have a sore throat, or have nasal congestion

(a stuffy nose). They will not make respiratory infection go away faster. Do not use a decongestant if you have high blood pressure.

- Antibiotics will not make respiratory infections go away faster. **Do not take antibiotics** unless your healthcare provider tells you to.

About taking medicine if you do not have symptoms

If you have a respiratory infection but do not have symptoms, do not take:

- Cold medicine
- Acetaminophen
- Over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Advil®) and naproxen (Aleve®)

These medicines may hide the symptoms of an infection.

It's OK to take baby aspirin (low-dose aspirin) if your healthcare provider told you to. Talk with your healthcare provider about how much to take each day. Follow their instructions.

Keep track of your temperature

Measure your temperature 2 times every day. Do this once in the morning and once in the evening.

Call your healthcare provider if:

- You're getting chemotherapy (chemo) and have a new fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- You have a fever of 102 °F (38.9 °C) or higher that lasts for 24 hours and doesn't improve after taking acetaminophen.

Eating and drinking

- Eat light meals. For example, have 6 small meals throughout the day instead of 3 big ones. This will help with nausea and appetite loss (not feeling hungry).
- Drink 6 to 8 (8-ounce) cups of liquids every day. This will help you stay hydrated and help loosen mucus in your nose and lungs. Water, sports drinks, carbonated (fizzy) drinks without caffeine, juices, tea, and soup are good choices.

Important information for COVID-19

COVID-19 may cause a cough that lasts several weeks. As long as your cough is improving, it's usually not a concern.

Call your healthcare provider if:

- Your cough gets worse.
- You start coughing up blood or large amounts of mucus.

Going to an outpatient appointment while you have a respiratory viral infection

When you check in for an appointment, tell the reception staff if you have symptoms of a respiratory viral infection. These include a fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, or sneezing. They will bring you to a private room. A nurse will ask you more about your symptoms.

If you have any symptoms of a respiratory infection, do not:

- Sit in the waiting area.
- Eat in the cafeteria.
- Visit people who are staying in the hospital.

When to call your healthcare provider

Call your healthcare provider right away if you:

- You have trouble breathing when you're resting.
- You have trouble breathing when you walk short distances. An example of a short distance is walking from one room to another, about 25 feet (7.6 meters).
- You're getting chemo and have a new fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- You have a fever of 102 °F (38.9 °C) or higher that lasts

for 24 hours and does not get better after you take acetaminophen.

- You have blood in your sputum.
- You have chest pain.
- You have a very bad headache.
- You have questions or concerns.

More resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- New York State Department of Health

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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