

TO: All primary schools and SEN schools

FROM: Dr Abigail Collins, Consultant in Public Health Medicine; National Clinical Lead Child Health Public Health

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RE: HSE Public Health update – Significant rise in RSV/Bronchiolitis infections in young children

DATE: 20 November 2023

We often see a large increase in infections in winter.

Significant increase in RSV infections

We are currently seeing a significant increase in the RSV virus (<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/rsv/>), a common winter viral infection which is of particular concern for babies.

Typical symptoms of RSV

Symptoms of viral infections, including RSV typically include:

- runny or blocked nose
- mild fever
- cough
- lethargy (tiredness)

Most children with viral infections, including RSV can safely be cared for at home. More information can be found at <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/colds-coughs-children/>. However, in babies and young children, (particularly those under 5 years), bronchiolitis can cause more significant difficulties in breathing and feeding. Babies and young children are more likely to need hospital care. (More details on on how to take care of a baby with bronchiolitis at home and when to get help can be found here <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/bronchiolitis/>)

Important messages for families and children regarding *any* infections:

- 1) The most important measure is for your child to stay home from school and activities if your child is unwell.**

Many children might have a runny nose or a slight cough in winter season and still feel well. However, if a child is feeling unwell they should stay at home and away from school and activities until their symptoms have finished and they are feeling well.

See <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/colds-coughs-children/>

Children who are unwell with one infection are more likely to get another infection, and may become more significantly unwell. Therefore staying at home will protect your child from other viruses while they are unwell, which may well also be circulating.

Further, **Children with symptoms are more likely to spread infections**. Staying home when unwell will help prevent spread to other children, families and staff. This is important particularly in primary schools where other children in their class may have younger siblings and babies at home.

Children who have had a viral infection, like bronchiolitis, may have a persistent cough after infection for a few weeks; once the fever and any other symptoms have finished, they should not be excluded because of this persistent cough alone.

Staff: if staff are unwell they also should not attend until their symptoms have resolved.

Older children and staff may not be particularly unwell with RSV, but babies and young children can become very unwell with the infection, therefore taking infection prevention and control measures are very important.

2) Infection, prevention and control measures

- Cover coughs and sneezes
- Keep hands clean

Measures that we all got used to with Covid-19 are still important. They should be encouraged for everyone. These measures help stop the spread of infection.

3) Vaccination

Making sure your child is up to date on **all** recommended childhood vaccinations will help:

- stop your child getting an infection and
- make them less likely to be unwell if they do get an infection

Routine childhood vaccinations protect against many significant viral and bacterial infections.

More information is available at <https://www2.hse.ie/babies-children/vaccines-your-child/>

There is currently no vaccine routinely available against RSV infection; but there are vaccines available and recommended for flu and Covid-19.

Flu vaccine

The free nasal spray flu vaccine is available for children aged 2 to 12 years from GP and pharmacies. It helps protect your children from getting seriously ill with the flu, as well as helping to protect babies and grandparents in the family.

See <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/flu/childrens-flu-vaccine/>

Many adults are also recommended to have the flu vaccine. More information is available at www2.hse.ie/conditions/flu/getting-the-vaccine/

Vaccination for Covid-19 is recommended particularly for children with weak immune systems
www2.hse.ie/screening-and-vaccinations/covid-19-vaccine/get-the-vaccine/children/