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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 viral infections are infections in the nose, throat, or sinuses. These infections are caused by a virus. They can be serious for people who have another illness or a weakened immune system.

Viruses that cause respiratory infections include:

- Adenovirus
- Human metapneumovirus (meh-TA-NOO-moh-VY-rus)
- Parainfluenza (PAYR-uh-IN-floo-EN-zuh) virus
- Influenza (the flu)
- Respiratory syncytial (sin-SIH-shul) virus (RSV)
- Rhinovirus/enterovirus (EN-teh-roh-VY-rus)
- Coronavirus (COVID-19)

# Signs and symptoms of respiratory viral infections

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

- A fever of 100.4° F (38° C) or higher
- Sore throat
- Chills
- Cough
- Headache
- Runny nose
- Body aches
- Fatigue (feeling tired)
- General discomfort

## How respiratory viral infections spread

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

Respiratory viral infections can also be spread when droplets fall onto 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 move you to a private room.

### Staff and visitors

We will put a sign on your door telling all staff and visitors to clean their hands before going into your room. They can wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

All staff and visitors must wear a mask, eye protection, gown, and gloves while in your room. They can get these outside of your room. They should throw these away 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.

## **How prevent spreading respiratory viral infections**

Avoid close contact with others until your symptoms go away. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer often, especially after you cough or sneeze. Always cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow, not your hand. Don't share items such as cups, drinking glasses, food utensils, or toys. You can also ask family members and close friends to get the flu vaccine.

## **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 patients who are staying in the hospital.

# More information

If you have any questions, talk to your healthcare provider. You can also visit the following websites to learn more:

## **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

## **New York State Department of Health**

[www.health.ny.gov](http://www.health.ny.gov)

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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