

Frequently Asked Questions about...

Respiratory Illnesses

Q. What is a respiratory illness?

A. A respiratory illness is an infection of the respiratory system, which includes the nose, sinuses, throat, and lungs. Respiratory illnesses can be caused by viral or bacterial infections and range in severity from mild head colds to severe influenza or pneumonia infections.

Q. What are the symptoms of respiratory illnesses?

A. Respiratory illnesses may affect different areas of the respiratory tract, and can be classified as an upper respiratory infection or lower respiratory infection. Symptoms may include nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat, cough, shortness of breath, chest congestion, wheezing, fever, headaches, and body aches.

Q. How does someone contract a respiratory illness?

A. Respiratory illnesses can be transmitted through direct person-to-person contact or by droplets containing infectious material that are spread into the air when an ill person coughs or sneezes. Many bacteria and viruses that cause respiratory illnesses can also survive on a variety of objects in the environment such as bed rails, door knobs, wheelchairs, or patient care equipment.

Q. Why may patients in healthcare facilities be at risk for contracting respiratory illnesses?

A. Patients may be at risk for contracting respiratory illnesses for a variety of reasons. Many patients have weakened immune systems or underlying health conditions that make them more likely to become sick if they are exposed to viruses or bacteria. Patients, visitors, or staff may carry the virus and spread it to others in close contact if they do not perform appropriate hand hygiene and cough etiquette.

Q. Can respiratory illnesses be treated?

A. Yes. Mild respiratory illnesses usually require little medical intervention. Severe or more complicated courses of respiratory illness can be treated with antibiotics or antiviral medications, based on a doctor's recommendations.

Q. What is the best way to prevent contracting a respiratory illness?

A. To prevent contracting a respiratory illness, practice good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette. Hands should be washed often using warm, soapy water for at least 15 seconds. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer is often effective if soap and water are not available. Coughs and sneezes should be covered with a tissue or directed into the elbow instead of the hands. After coughing or sneezing, it is important to throw away any used tissues and follow up with hand washing. Thorough and frequent environmental cleaning with an Environment Protection Agency (EPA)-registered disinfectant is also effective at preventing the transmission of viruses and bacteria through the environment. Finally, pneumococcal vaccination and annual seasonal influenza vaccination will help prevent pneumonia and influenza, two of the more serious respiratory illnesses that may affect patients in healthcare facilities.

Contact your local health department if you have additional questions about respiratory illnesses