

UW Health: RSV cases in children are on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic

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MADISON, Wis. – Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) has been on the rise this summer among children, and since symptoms can be similar to those of COVID-19, a UW Health expert is sharing what parents need to know.

Cases of RSV, a common respiratory virus most people contract in childhood, have been increasing in Wisconsin since July. This is unusual because this infection is much more common January through March, according to Dr. Gregory DeMuri, infectious disease pediatrician, UW Health.

“We didn’t see it this winter because people were wearing masks, they were staying home, kids weren’t in school or daycare, people were social distancing, so kids just didn’t have contact to spread it,” DeMuri said. “But then this summer when people started gathering more, masking less and kids went back to daycare, we saw this explosion in cases in RSV in July and August and now into September.”

Like COVID-19, RSV is transmitted from respiratory secretions and droplets. And like COVID-19, RSV can lead to hospitalization.

“We have seen many hospitalizations of children in July and August with RSV, and the most severe cases have been among the very young, ages zero to 2 years old,” DeMuri said. “Given this uncharacteristic rise in RSV coupled with the COVID-19 surge, it is important for kids with any overlapping symptom to get tested for COVID-19 and quarantine at home to avoid passing either virus to other children or community members.”

At this time there isn't enough data to know whether kids who have had cases of RSV, particularly severe cases, are at risk for more severe COVID-19, or vice versa, according to DeMuri.

There are ongoing studies to see if the two viruses are worse together, but UW Health has not seen many dual infections of COVID-19 and RSV in kids.

There is no vaccine for RSV, and almost every child gets RSV by the time they reach adulthood, but the timing of this surge could complicate hospital care.

"Having RSV right now really does put extra stress on hospitals and health systems and in certain parts of the country where cases and hospitalization of RSV are high along with COVID, it is just making matters worse," said Demuri. "Here in Madison we are able to handle it but it is something we are closely monitoring."

There is a monoclonal antibody injection that can be given to children with underlying conditions that place them at risk for severe disease with RSV.

Important tips for parents to know about RSV during the COVID-19 pandemic

- If your child has fever, cough, runny nose, sore throat, etc., they should get a COVID-19 test to rule out that virus.
- Like COVID-19, wearing masks helps prevent RSV.
- Children 12 and older should get the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to reduce the risk of getting COVID-19 in addition to RSV.
- Good hand hygiene and disinfection are very important for the prevention of RSV.
- Children with symptoms of RSV should stay home from daycare or school.