

Keeping your premature baby well after going home

A Guide to Chest Infections.



Most babies do well.

Babies born prematurely can sometimes become more unwell with respiratory infections because their lungs and immune system are still developing. This booklet explains how to reduce risk, what RSV protection is available, what to do if your baby becomes unwell, and when to get help.

1 Why can infections matter more after premature birth?

When a baby is born early, there has been less time for the lungs and immune system to develop before birth. Some premature babies also have bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD) or need oxygen or breathing support.



What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is a viral infection of the small airways. It often begins with a blocked or runny nose and cough, then some babies develop faster breathing, wheeze, reduced feeding or tiredness.

Common respiratory viruses

- Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)
- Rhinovirus
- Influenza (flu)
- COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses

2 How can we reduce the risk of infection?

It is impossible to prevent every infection, and families do not need to isolate their baby completely. These practical steps can reduce exposure:



Wash hands before touching your baby.



Ask unwell visitors to wait until they are better.



Keep your baby's home and car smoke-free.

Other important steps

- Keep routine childhood immunisations up to date.
- Breast milk, where possible, provides antibodies and other immune factors.
- Ask your neonatal or community team whether extra precautions are sensible during times of high virus circulation.

A helpful message for visitors

"We would love you to meet the baby. Please rearrange if you have a cold or other infection, and wash your hands before holding them."

3 Protection against RSV

RSV, or Respiratory Syncytial Virus, is a very common virus. For many children it causes a cold-like illness, but in young babies it can cause bronchiolitis or pneumonia. Premature babies and babies with lung, heart or immune problems have a higher risk of severe disease.



How can a baby be protected?

- Maternal RSV vaccination during pregnancy helps antibodies cross the placenta and protect the baby after birth.
- A long-acting RSV monoclonal antibody may be offered to eligible babies, particularly very premature infants born before 32 weeks during or just before their first RSV season.
- These medicines reduce the risk of severe RSV disease but do not prevent every RSV infection.

Important

Guidance on RSV products and eligibility can change. Families should ask their neonatal or paediatric team what applies to their baby.

4 My baby has a cough or cold - what should I do?

Most respiratory infections get better with time and can usually be managed at home.



What can I do at home?

- Offer usual milk. Smaller, more frequent feeds may be easier.
- Saline nose drops may help a blocked nose.
- Keep checking breathing, feeding, alertness and wet nappies.
- If your baby is under 3 months old and has a temperature of 38°C or higher, seek urgent medical advice.

How is bronchiolitis treated?

Treatment is mainly supportive while the infection improves. Babies who need hospital care may require oxygen, help with feeding or fluids, or breathing support.

5 When should I get help?

Use the words as well as the colours – if you are worried, seek advice.



GREEN - usually manage at home

Baby is comfortable; breathing normally for them; feeding reasonably; alert or behaving normally; and having usual wet nappies.

AMBER - seek medical advice today

Contact your GP, neonatal/community team or NHS 111 if breathing is becoming harder or faster; feeding is much less than usual; there has been no wet nappy for 12 hours; symptoms are worsening; or you are worried.

RED - urgent / emergency help

Call 999 or seek emergency care for pauses in breathing; blue or grey lips, tongue or skin; severe breathing difficulty; or if your baby is floppy, exhausted or difficult to wake.

Premature babies can sometimes become unwell more quickly, so it is appropriate to have a lower threshold for seeking advice.

6 Help, trusted information and research



Where to get help

- Your neonatal or community neonatal team.
- Your GP surgery.
- NHS 111 – urgent medical advice when it is not a 999 emergency.
- 999 / Emergency Department – for emergency warning signs or if your baby is seriously unwell.

Can we prevent more respiratory infections in the future?

Research studies such as the BALLOON Trial are investigating new ways of preventing respiratory illnesses after premature babies leave hospital.

Developed by the BALLOON Team

<https://balloon-trial.uk>

Scan to visit the BALLOON website
and parent information page.



Important information / disclaimer

This booklet provides general information and does not replace individual medical advice, diagnosis or treatment from your baby's healthcare team.

Recommendations for vaccination, RSV prevention, healthcare services and emergency contact numbers vary between countries and may change over time.

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