

Tool 24: Helpful Information about Common Respiratory Viruses

Virus	Epidemiology	Incubation Period	Symptoms and symptoms duration	Period of communicability	
Influenza A (In Northern Hemisphere)	Between October and March Causes mild to severe symptoms Causes infection in all age groups with highest incidence in children; highest mortality in elderly and those with comorbidity Can infect animals and humans Causes most outbreaks	1-4 days (average = 3 days)	Fever, cough (often severe and may last longer than other symptoms), headache, muscle/joint pain, sore throat, prostration, and exhaustion. Gastro-intestinal symptoms may occur in children Duration: 2-7 days	3-5 days from clinical onset in adults (Average = 4 days); up to 7 days in young children Asymptomatic people may be infectious	Yearly vaccine (for Influenza A and B) Anti-influenza medications for prophylaxis and treatment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neuraminidase inhibitors for Influenza A and B (Oseltamivir or Zanamivir)
	Influenza B (In Northern Hemisphere)			Between October and March Causes milder infection Mostly affects children Can cause outbreaks	
Parainfluenza virus Types 1, 2, 3 and 4	Entire year (little seasonal pattern) Predominately causes infection and outbreaks in young children and the elderly	2-6 days	Fever, cough, wheezing Croup	From shortly prior to clinical onset and for duration of active disease	Symptomatic treatment only

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Respiratory Syncytial virus (RSV)	Usually seasonal: winter and early spring Predominantly causes infection & outbreaks in young children and the elderly	2-8 days	Fever, cough, wheezing Bronchiolitis in children Pneumonia in adults	Shortly before clinical onset and duration of active disease. Viral shedding may persist for several weeks or longer after symptoms have subsided, especially in children	
Adenovirus	Usually fall and winter Causes infection in all ages	Usually 4-5 days, range 2-14 days for respiratory disease	Conjunctivitis, sore throat, fever, and other respiratory symptoms	From up to a week prior to clinical onset and for duration of active disease Viral shedding may persist for long time	Symptomatic treatment only
Common respiratory viruses, such as: Rhinovirus Coronavirus Human Metapneumo-virus Echovirus, Coxsackievirus and other Enteroviruses	Throughout the year with peaks in the spring and fall	Usually 2-3 days, but may be longer	‘Common cold’ type illness: Sneezing, runny nose, cough, sore throat, sinus congestion, malaise, headache, myalgia (muscle aches) and/or low-grade fever	Viral shedding usually most abundant during the first -3 days of clinical illness. Shedding usually ceases by 7-10 days, but may continue for up to 3 weeks	Symptomatic treatment only

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SARS-CoV-2	Epidemiology is evolving at the time of writing.	The incubation period for SARS-CoV-2 may differ depending on the variant. Pre-Omicron, the incubation period ranged from 2-14 days, with a median of 5 to 7 days. The incubation period for Omicron has a shorter median of 3 days (range 0-8 days) (11-14)	Cough and fever, loss of smell or taste, sore throat, fatigue, headache	Cases are most infectious during the few days before and after symptom onset. Transmissibility declines rapidly 2-3 days after symptom onset	
Bordetella Pertussis	Neither infection nor immunization provides lifelong immunity	7-10 days (range 5-21 days)	Mild URI with minimal or fever, progresses to cough then paroxysms of cough with inspiratory whoop a commonly followed by vomiting. Duration 6-10 weeks	From onset of early symptoms and first two weeks of cough	Immunization, chemoprophylaxis for all household contacts and close contacts regardless of age and immunization status. Antibiotic therapy for treatment
Legionella sp.	Acquired through inhalation of aerosolized contaminated water, NOT from person to person	2-10 days	Fever, cough progressive respiratory distress. Occurs most commonly in those who are elderly, immune-compromised or have underlying lung disease	Person to person transmission not documented	Antibiotic therapy for treatment

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Mycoplasma Pneumoniae	Worldwide non-seasonal. More common in school age and young adults	2-3 weeks (range 1-4 weeks)	Fever, acute bronchial cough non-productive initially	Duration of symptoms	Mild illness may resolve on its own, inherently resistant to beta-lactam agents
Chlamydia Pneumoniae	Throughout the year, no seasonality	21 days	Fever, sore throat, prolonged cough, headache, and malaise	Not defined	Antibiotics based on clinical picture

Adapted from PICNetBC 2018 and BCCDC 2022 VRI toolkit– Respiratory Outbreak Guidelines. Available at: <http://www.picnet.ca/> Guidelines and Toolkits Tab or directly at: [Respiratory-Infection-Outbreak-Guidelines-for-Healthcare-Facilities November-2018.pdf \(picnet.ca\)](#) for “Respiratory Infection Outbreak Guidelines for Healthcare Facilities”