



PATHOLOGY TESTS EXPLAINED

Information about pathology tests to help everyone take control of their health and make the right decisions about their care.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TESTING FOR RSV

RSV is a common infection that affects the respiratory tract. Its full name is respiratory syncytial virus. The infection starts in the upper tract – your nose and throat – but can spread to your lower tract – your bronchial tubes and lungs.

In adults and healthy children, RSV symptoms are mild, and most people recover in a week or two. However, RSV can cause severe symptoms in infants and babies, older people, someone with a weakened immune system such as with an underlying conditions like heart or lung disease, or cancer. It can cause:

- pneumonia – infection of the lungs
- bronchiolitis – infection of the airway passages in the lungs
- croup – infection of the voice box and windpipe.



Taking a nasal swab

You can be re-infected with different strains of RSV from year to year, although subsequent infections tend to be less severe than the first (primary) infection. Since most RSV infections are mild, symptoms from re-infections are usually attributed to a cold. These cases of RSV are usually not formally diagnosed and are often treated with over-the-counter cold remedies for symptom relief.

Tests are usually ordered when an infant or elderly person has more serious symptoms such as wheezing, severe coughing, rapid breathing, fevers, headaches, a runny stuffy nose, and a sore throat. Older children and the general population are not routinely tested.



Vaccination

An RSV vaccine is available privately in Australia for adults aged 60 years and older who may be at higher risk of severe disease. It is recommended for all people aged 75 years and over, First Nations people aged 60 years and over, and adults aged 60 years and over with medical conditions that increase their risk of severe RSV disease.

Western Australia and Queensland health departments provide free immunisation to babies and children. Further vaccination programs are expected to follow in other states.



Testing

RSV testing detects the virus in a nose or throat swab. Since detectable amounts of virus are usually only shed for the first few days of an RSV infection, most testing must be done during this early period.

Your doctor may also order a strep throat test to check for group A streptococcus, the bacteria that cause strep throat, when the cause of the infection is unclear.

Molecular tests

RT-PCR (real time polymerase chain reaction) tests look for genetic material from the virus. These are extremely accurate and can detect even small amounts of the virus. Samples are sent to a pathology laboratory for testing. In many laboratories, the test for RSV is combined with tests for other respiratory viruses such as the flu, adenovirus, rhinovirus, parainfluenza viruses and COVID-19. Results are usually available the same day.

Rapid antigen testing

A rapid RSV antigen test can be performed by your doctor using a test kit. These tests detect antigens produced by the virus that trigger your immune system. RSV rapid antigen is quick - most results are available within an hour – however, it lacks sensitivity and is more suitable in a situation where the likelihood of infection is already high, for example, testing an infant with typical symptoms during an epidemic.



What your results can show

Result	Interpretation
Positive	You are most likely to have an RSV infection.
Negative	No signs of the virus were found in your sample. This may mean that your symptoms are due to something other than RSV or that there is not enough virus in the sample to detect. This may be due to either a poor sample collection or because you are not shedding enough virus to detect. Adults and older children tend to shed less virus than infants.



Having a medical test

The choice of tests your doctor makes will be based on your medical history and symptoms. Make sure you tell them everything you think might help.

You play a central role in making sure your test results are accurate. Do everything you can to make sure the information you provide is correct and follow instructions closely.

Talk to your doctor about any medication you are taking. Find out if you need to fast or stop any particular foods or supplements. These may affect your results.



Questions to ask your doctor

- Why does this test need to be done?
- Do I need to prepare (such as fast or avoid medications) for the sample collection?
- Will an abnormal result mean I need further tests?
- How could it change the course of my care?
- What will happen next, after the test?

For more detailed information on these and many other tests go to pathologytestsexplained.org.au



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www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au

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Pathology Tests Explained is managed by a consortium of medical and scientific organisations representing pathology practice in Australia. More details at:

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Click on the link to find information about what your tests are investigating or measuring and what your results can tell your doctor.