WHAT IS IT?
- Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a major factor in bronchiolitis and pneumonia in young children, and sporadic acute bronchitis and mild upper respiratory tract infections in adults.
- It produces a variety of symptoms in different areas of the respiratory tract, from the nose to the lungs.
- In more severe cases respiratory syncytial virus can result in respiratory failure.

CAUSES
- RSV is a negative-sense, enveloped RNA virus. The virus causes the formation of giant cells or syncytia.
- It survives only a few hours in the environment and can be easily destroyed with disinfectant.
- RSV is spread via respiratory secretions.
- It results from close contact with infected people or with contaminated objects.
- The virus enters the body through the mucous membranes of the eyes, mouth or nose, sometimes through inhalation of droplets caused by an infected person sneezing or coughing.
- In infants with severe infection there can be abnormal retractions of the muscles between the ribs, due to the effort of drawing breath.
- Infants born prematurely or those with compromised lung, heart or immune systems are at greatest risk of developing serious complications from RSV infection.

SYMPTOMS
- Wheezing.
- Fever.
- Cough.
- Rapid breathing.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Blue lips or fingernails caused by reduced blood oxygen.
- Chest X-ray can show pneumonia or bronchiolitis.
- Arterial blood gas analysis can identify decreased oxygen saturation.

TREATMENT
- Mild infections normally resolve without treatment.
- More severe infections may require hospital treatment with oxygen therapy, humidified air, and hydration using intravenous fluids.
- A ventilator may be used to provide respiratory support.
- Bronchodilators can be administered to open the airways of the lungs. In very serious cases antiviral drugs such as ribavirin may be tried.
- Antibiotics are of no use in the treatment of RSV.

PREVENTION
- Advise parents to avoid contact with anyone who has a cold or fever.
- Advise parents that kissing an infected baby can spread infection.
- Environmental tobacco smoke inhalation is linked to RSV exacerbation, therefore smoking cessation advice should be given to parents.
- If a child is considered to be at high risk, for example one born before 32 weeks’ gestation, parents should seek medical advice.

REFERENCES