

hand hygiene

# I'm More Dangerous to Children

BY TORI WHITACRE MARTONICZ

I was originally identified in California in 1962 and am part of a big family of viruses. More than 300 different types of us cause varying contagious infections.

I am one of the respiratory subtypes in my family that primarily affects children and teenagers. Adults can get me, and I am highly contagious and spread through coughing or sneezing. You can catch me anytime, but most commonly from August to November. I live in mucus, saliva, and phlegm in the lungs and stool. Most individuals with me have mild cold-like symptoms such as cough, body aches, runny nose, coughing, and sneezing. Severe symptoms may include wheezing and difficulty breathing.

Most individuals recover from me without serious problems, but because children have had little or no exposure to me, they have no immunity, and their symptoms are often more severe. By the time an individual is an adult, they often have had me many times.

However, some children and adults with comorbidities who get me will develop severe and life-threatening respiratory problems. I cause individuals with asthma and other breathing difficulties or who develop problems like pneumonia to be hospitalized.

Another rare but known concern is that a small number of children with me will develop a nervous system disorder called

acute flaccid myelitis (AFM). This disorder causes extreme muscle weakness and can lead to permanent paralysis. Signs of AFM, such as arm or leg weakness, slurred speech, or facial drooping, appear suddenly and are similar to that of a stroke. If a child develops AFM, it typically happens a few weeks after a child recovers from me. Over time, children with AFM may regain some degree of strength and function. Sometimes physical and occupational therapy can help, but for a small number of children, the paralysis is permanent.

Unless you have more severe symptoms, you often won't seek out medical care and get a test for me, so it is difficult to pinpoint how many infections there are of me. Sometimes it is easier to identify who is infected. For example, an outbreak in 2014 caused almost 1400 children and adults to be hospitalized with severe respiratory infections because of me. Fourteen individuals died, and more than 130 children developed AFM. This national outbreak was the first to cause high numbers of severe symptoms from me. Additional outbreaks occurred in 2016 and 2018. A jump in the number of children developing AFM occurred after my outbreak in 2016 and 2018. At the same time, millions of

To discover who I am, visit [InfectionControlToday.com/view/May-2023-bug-month](https://www.infectioncontroltoday.com/view/May-2023-bug-month)

individuals possibly had me in each of those years but with milder symptoms.

Most pregnant women have developed some immunity from me because of previous exposures. I don't appear to cause problems during pregnancy, but if I infect the mother at the time of childbirth or while breastfeeding, there is a small chance that the baby may catch me. However, serious problems in infants are rare.

Since my 2014 outbreak, US surveillance for me has been expanded by the CDC. Higher levels of me were detected during the late summer and early fall of 2016 and 2018, but at lower levels in 2015, 2017, and 2019.

Because my family is large, 1 or more of us are always around. A few of us are more active than others at times. Sometimes I am not as active and have a quiet year. It's fun to watch the CDC work to better understand my seasonality and annual trends. The CDC also continues to work with states to test specimens for members of my family, support the identification and investigation of my outbreaks, and monitor my seasonal activity.

*I am Enterovirus D68!* ▣