Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)  
*Not Only for Kids*

RSV is primarily known as a cause of illness in infants and children. In older adults, the symptoms are similar to the common cold, only they are more severe and longer lasting. Although RSV disease is somewhat milder than influenza, RSV infections are more common. Influenza causes 36,000 deaths in adults per year compared to about half that many adult deaths with RSV. RSV, like influenza, is highly contagious entering the nose or eyes by hands or by contact with residue from coughs or sneezes. As recently reported in the lead article of the *New England Journal of Medicine*:

“RSV infection is an important illness in elderly and high-risk adults, with a disease burden similar to that of nonpandemic influenza in a population in which the prevalence of vaccination for influenza is high. Although pediatricians are keenly aware that RSV may cause serious illness in their patients, most internists are less aware of RSV.”

This virus poses a significant threat to the elderly, as much as influenza. An estimated 14,000 elderly and high-risk adults die annually from RSV accounting for more than 175,000 hospitalizations, with a cost exceeding one billion dollars.

RSV is well known as the most common cause of bronchiolitis and pneumonia among infants and children under 1 year of age. But this virus also continues to cause repeated infections throughout life. Children shed much higher titers of many viruses than adults, so viral tests may have a lower sensitivity in older patients.

Reference:
A. Falsey, et al “Respiratory Syncytial Virus Infection in Elderly and High-Risk Adults” Vol 352, No. 17, April 2005. (This four year study is the first large investigation over a substantial period of time using state-of-the-art diagnostic techniques.)
In 2005 Metropolitan Medical Laboratory had an 18% overall positive rate for tests ordered for RSV. There was a definite seasonal predominance of ordering from November through April. Of the 1,019 tests ordered, there were none ordered on older adults (over age 65 years).

Data from Metropolitan Medical Laboratory, PLC

Metropolitan Medical Laboratory, PLC offers RSV testing by rapid antigen detection. The specimen of choice for RSV is a nasopharyngeal swab, which should be in viral transport media, refrigerated, and sent to the lab immediately.

Metro Lab/PYA/1/06