

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now As RSV surges in Minnesota, Journalist Jana Shortal shares her son's story 01GGWXY7749ZNSVMYN19F9J0VP**

MELISSA TOWNSEND: Jana Shortal is a journalist and a host of the show Breaking the News on KARE 11. But she had to call in sick this week because her son Zeke came down with RSV. That stands for respiratory syncytial virus. The number of kids in Minnesota with RSV tripled during the month of October.

Most of the time, it causes mild, cold-like symptoms, but the CDC says two out of every 100 cases can become severe. It's tough on these very young children. It's putting a strain on families and on the health care system. Jana Shortal joins me now to talk about her experience. Welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

**JANA SHORTAL:** Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

**MELISSA TOWNSEND:** Yeah. It's good to have you here. Thanks. So I said RSV stands for respiratory syncytial virus. But in your Twitter post yesterday, you said the RS stands for, "really sucks."

**JANA SHORTAL:** I'm not the wordsmith of a family. My wife is. But that's what I felt yesterday in the waiting room at Children's. We were at the end of like three days of really debating, should we tax our health care system? And yesterday morning, I just hit this wall-- part of it being just sadness for my kid.

And I don't have any other children, so just nervousness of, "Am I not checking a box here? Am I not making sure he's OK?" And then trying again to protect our health care workers because I know they're overwhelmed with so many families that need help right now.

When I was sitting in that waiting room and he was wheezing and trying to fall asleep on my chest and all these kids were in there coughing-- RS, really sucks.

**MELISSA TOWNSEND:** I bet every parent out there right now is like, uh huh. What were the symptoms you saw in your son that made you concerned?

**JANA SHORTAL:** I think that the way you described it is really accurate. My child goes to daycare so his parents can work, so we just figured it was the daycare sniffle cold. And that was almost a week ago. And then Friday night, we noticed this kind of wet cough, and I would say that's the thing that changed it.

And then Saturday, Sunday when he started not eating very much, if at all-- he would eat formula, but not food, and he's a very healthy eater. His eyes got red and watery, and then that wet coughing. He couldn't sleep. So at that point, you know it's crossed the threshold into cold, into something else.

And again, because of the work I do, I was like, this is absolutely adding up to RSV. But the thing about RSV is you can go to the doctor, you can go to the hospital. And unless your kid is one of those two that has to be admitted, there's nothing that can be done. They just have to go through it, which then enters into the, "How do we take care of ourselves as a family? How do we as middle-aged parents parenting for the first time-- how do we figure out how to stay well?"

As you can tell, my voice is a little off. It's hard because you have that secondary effect of then you get sick. I think it just goes around. I've heard from families who have been dealing with this for weeks and weeks, especially if they have more than one child.

**MELISSA TOWNSEND:** Yeah. How old is Zeke, if you don't mind me asking?

**JANA SHORTAL:** 10 and 1/2 months, so right in the age range of RSV.

**MELISSA** Tiny. He's tiny. Had you heard it was going around? You said you heard it probably through work.

**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** Oh, yeah. We've done so many RSV stories. And honestly, all of us for the last couple of years have just been conditioned to fear and react and understand when COVID is a threat, and then RSV jumps into center stage here this fall really early. And it just felt like a wave crashing.

It happened so fast here in Minnesota. I mean, as I said, my son is in daycare, and it's so contagious. And it's kind of like a disease came from behind you that you weren't expecting until the winter because you were still being so mindful about COVID.

**MELISSA** So tell me about the emergency room. You waited. What did the doctors say to you when you come in? How do

**TOWNSEND:** how do they check him out?

**JANA SHORTAL:** Yeah. So I didn't go to the emergency room. Children's Minneapolis has one of the few-- at least that I knew of-- walk-in clinic where you could get a same-day for sure appointment. And it was so early in the morning I couldn't call a pediatrician. And we're still figuring all that out as first time parents.

So a dear, dear friend of mine, Dr. Angela [INAUDIBLE] said, go to this place at Children's. And so I did, and I was probably the first or second person there. And just in the time I was waiting-- because they take appointments first-- I'm going to guess at least 200 people came through.

Like parents, kids, either with appointments, or trying to get through-- at least twice the waiting room was completely full while he and I were still waiting. It took about an hour and 45 minutes to get seen. The care was tremendous. I mean, think about it.

I don't know how many doctors or nurses were back there, but that many people are in their waiting room. They just can't keep up. But the care was tremendous, and they were so, so kind. They immediately tested him for RSV, COVID, and flu. And within an hour, they had a positive test for RSV.

**MELISSA** Oh, wow. So now, what is the treatment? What do you do?

**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** I mean, hope. Go on Twitter and ask people for advice. Basically like any trick-- you really find yourself open to anything at this point because he's so little. He can't take Benadryl or NyQuil. I mean, you just can't do that to a baby.

So we've done everything from going the bathroom, shut the door, turn on the water really hot, and try and ease out his chest cough. Stick them over a humidifier and try to get the snot to drip out. Rock him. Love him. Take him on really long walks to get fresh air, and you just try to get through it.

As you mentioned, I wasn't able to go to KARE 11 yesterday just because my wife has, in my opinion, hit a wall. Because she's up with him more at night than I am, because we try to preserve a few hours for me so I can be healthy enough to go report. But that just-- all bets were off for the last five days.

**MELISSA** What did the doctors say about how long this might last?

**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** I mean, I don't even want to say it out loud.

**MELISSA** Really?

**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** Yeah. I mean, they said some kids-- I mean, if you're like a miracle baby, five days, but he's at day six now. And he's better than he was two days ago. The weekend was the worst, and yesterday it was pretty bad. But it can go up to two weeks in terms of them being contagious and/or seeing that after effect.

**MELISSA** So what will you and your wife do about work?

**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** Luckily, she is on sabbatical right now from her work as a professor. And I really don't like missing work because I think I have never been able to escape the part of culture that tells a parent they can do it all. And I worry even missing one day that I'll be replaced.

The mommy tax that all of us have gone through that if we aren't there, somebody else is going to be able to take our position that doesn't have a child that they need to care for. That may be unrealistic, but it's a very big anxiety I have. And historically, it's been true.

**MELISSA** Yeah. You're not making that up.

**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** No, it's not made up.

**MELISSA** So do you have advice for other parents right now going through this also? There's plenty of parents in these

**TOWNSEND:** shoes.

**JANA SHORTAL:** One of the things-- because they can't prescribe any medicine or predict how it will go, but one of the last things the medical team at Children's said to me before Zeke and I left the exam room was, find any iota of grace you have inside yourself for how hard this could be and emotionally prepare yourself for this to last longer than you think it should.

That does not mean it will happen, but that was advice I'd never gotten from a doctor is that I should emotionally prepare myself for something. I mean, I guess in our lived experience, I'm the first to say that this has been much harder on my wife than me because she's at home as more primary to him than I am at this point in his life. And so he just needs to be held.

But I think just pay attention to your kid. Just because my kid didn't get admitted doesn't mean yours doesn't need to be. Urgent care and walk in clinics-- albeit crowded-- are there for a reason.

I'm grateful that I went, even though I may not have had to. I just needed that for myself as a first time parent. Practical advice-- for myself, I went to the walk in clinic at Children's.

Go first thing in the morning the minute they open. Don't wait, because oftentimes, that happens at urgent cares, too. If you have the opportunity to, go first in the morning because they sometimes are closing late morning because they have so many people. They have enough people in their waiting room by 9:30 to be done for the day.

Don't worry about-- like I was told for my kid, just make sure they're drinking. If they're not eating, that's OK. Sometimes, we don't like to eat either when we're sick. It'll get better. It just takes a while.

**MELISSA** Well, we are wishing you and Zeke and your wife all the best and good health and a speedy recovery.  
**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** Thanks.

**MELISSA** And thank you for coming on today. Appreciate it.  
**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** Thank you. Zeke is a big MPR fan. He wakes with Cathy in the morning. He's got Minnesota Now at noon. I mean, he's dialed in.

**MELISSA** She'll be back next week. Let him know. She'll be back.  
**TOWNSEND:**

**JANA SHORTAL:** OK, sounds good.

**MELISSA** Jana Shortal is a journalist at KARE 11.  
**TOWNSEND:**