

RSV Vaccine Fall 2024 Guidance

RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) is a very common infection that spreads like the flu each fall and winter. RSV is one of the leading causes of ER visits and hospitalizations in the U.S. It also kills over 8,000 Americans in an average year. Although most hospitalizations and deaths occur in older individuals, young children are also very susceptible to severe illness. Young children are at least 7-times more likely to become seriously ill from RSV than they are from influenza or covid. Two years ago, many pediatric hospitals ran out of ICU beds due to the number of young children infected with RSV.

There is a vaccine that prevents the complications of RSV, but there are two major differences from flu vaccines. First, the vaccine lasts for years, so yearly shots are not needed. Second, the RSV vaccine is currently only available for pregnant women (to protect newborns from infection) and older Americans.

RSV vaccines are highly recommended for pregnant women, everyone 75 and older, and 60-74 year-olds at high-risk of complications from lung infections, including those with heart disease. Among those 60 and older, there are an average of 110,000 RSV hospitalizations and 8,000 deaths each year across the country. We know that RSV vaccines last for many years, so anyone who has had an RSV vaccine in the past does not need to be revaccinated. Since RSV vaccines last for years, anyone who is unvaccinated can get their inoculation now and not have to worry about their protection wearing off before the winter virus ends. The best advice is to get your vaccine now while you're thinking about it.

RSV is the leading cause of hospitalization for infants and young children. During a typical fall/winter season, there are 50,000-80,000 RSV hospitalizations among children younger than 5 years old, with an average of 200 deaths. About 800 Maryland infants are hospitalized with RSV each year. Most of these hospitalizations and deaths occur to babies without obvious medical risk factors and happen before 8-months old.

Pregnant women should get an RSV vaccine when they are between 32-36 weeks if they are due to give birth during RSV season (September-March). When a pregnant woman is vaccinated, for about 2 months she will make large amounts of antibodies to kill RSV. Timing the inoculation between 32-36 weeks of pregnancy optimizes the amount of protective antibody transferred to the baby through the umbilical cord. Mom's antibodies will continue to protect her baby for 5-6 months after birth. This is also true for maternal antibodies produced in response to flu, pertussis (whooping cough), and covid vaccinations. Babies who are breastfed get continued antibody benefits.

For babies who are under 8-months old and whose mothers did not receive a vaccine while pregnant, pediatricians can administer an antibody inoculation called Beyfortus in the fall. The inoculation lasts through the winter, and is just as protective against RSV as the vaccination. Children between 8 months and 1 ½ years old who have certain high-risk conditions are also eligible for antibody protection. Parents of children with high-risk medical conditions should talk to their pediatrician about RSV protection.