

## RSV is everywhere. Here's how to protect the people you love

By *Teddi Nicolaus*

If you've visited a drug store or paid attention to advertising lately, you've probably encountered a message telling you to consider getting an RSV vaccine. You might have wondered what it's all about.

RSV stands for respiratory syncytial virus. The name may sound new, but the virus is not.

"We've known about RSV for a very long time," says pediatrician Ruth Karron, MD, a professor and director of the Center for Immunization Research at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Even before it was identified in 1957, RSV was already a common cause of respiratory illness, especially in young kids. Today, as many as 80,000 infants are hospitalized each year in the U.S. because of RSV, making it the top reason for hospitalization for babies under age 1. Around the world, RSV is a major cause of serious illness and death in children, especially in places with few medical resources.

RSV is a type of infection known as an RNA virus. You don't need to remember the scientific details, but here's the simple version: RSV is a common cause of coughs and colds. Almost 100% of children have been infected with RSV at least once by the time they're age 2, and reinfections occur throughout life.

"RSV season is generally November to the beginning of April," Karron says.

"And for reasons we don't

really understand, in the U.S., RSV generally starts south to north, so places like Florida, Texas — the South — they get it earlier and can get it as early as August or September."

Most adults get RSV many times during their lives but don't know it. For adults, RSV often feels like an annoying cold: cough, runny nose, mild sore throat, maybe a mild fever. But it can also come with no symptoms, so adults can spread RSV without knowing it.

Babies are at greater risk for experiencing a more severe case of RSV because their immune systems are brand new and they haven't yet developed the strength to fight off many illnesses. According to the U.S.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, RSV is the No. 1 cause of pneumonia in babies.

"You could have what seems like a mild cold and give it to a baby who could be much sicker with it," Karron says.

Older adults and people with weakened immune systems — or heart and lung problems — also face a higher risk of getting very sick from RSV. As we age, our immune system naturally gets weaker, which makes it harder to fight off infections.

Fortunately, there are some simple ways you can help protect those who are most at risk. Covering your coughs and sneezes, wearing a mask when you're sick, washing your hands, and staying away from others when sick helps keep babies, grandparents and everyone in between safer from RSV.

And more good news: Vaccines that protect against RSV are safe, highly effective and offer essential protection for infants, older adults and people with weakened immune systems.

Getting the RSV vaccine during pregnancy is one of the most effective ways to protect your baby. Studies show the vaccine is safe for all involved and significantly reduces the risk of RSV-related hospitalization in newborns.

The vaccine works by helping your body make antibodies — powerful protective proteins — that pass through the placenta to the fetus. These antibodies give your



>> For more info on RSV, visit [www.idsociety.org](http://www.idsociety.org) or talk to your health care provider

newborn strong, immediate protection against the virus during their first RSV season, when the risk of hospitalization is highest.

A long-acting infant RSV antibody treatment can also be given to your baby in the hospital or at the pediatrician's office. Reach out to your child's health care provider for advice.

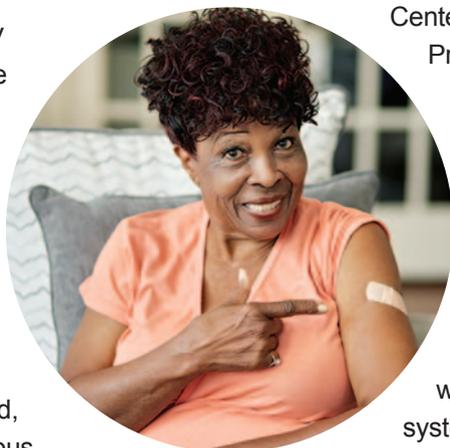
"Every baby under 8 months old in the U.S. should be protected against RSV," Karron says. "Whether moms are immunized during pregnancy or the babies get a shot when they are infants...every baby should be protected."

The first RSV vaccine for older adults became available to the public in 2023. Since then, other RSV vaccines have been approved. Those public service announcements you've been seeing at the pharmacy are part of

public health campaigns to raise awareness of RSV, especially during the RSV season — fall and winter — and to make sure you know about the vaccines that are available for at-risk groups.

CDC recommends RSV vaccines for all adults ages 75 and older, as well as for adults ages 50 to 74 who have conditions that put them at higher risk for severe RSV.

The recommendation also extends to people whose immune systems are already weakened, such as those with certain chronic conditions or people undergoing chemotherapy. With that in mind, the Infectious Diseases Society of America recommends that all immunocompromised people older than age 18 get an RSV vaccination.



Art courtesy iStockphoto: Pregnant woman, Viktor Cvetkovic; woman with bandage, Xavieramau; nurse and baby, FatCamera; illustrations, Svetlana Shamshurina