

What to Know About RSV This Winter

by Tim Ditman
December 2 2023 7:35 AM



Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) has made headlines the past two falls for hitting Americans early and hard. [Hannah High, APRN](#), an OSF HealthCare pulmonologist, expects the virus to be rough this cold weather season, too. But, each fall and winter – when respiratory illnesses peak – is different. So, it's important to know the latest guidance.



A reminder: what is RSV?

High says RSV is an illness that, for most, brings mild to moderate cold-like symptoms like cough, wheezing and shortness of breath. A provider can take a swab in your nose and run a test to see if you have RSV or something else, like influenza (the flu). Treatment is focused on alleviating symptoms while your immune system fights the virus. For example, you can use a saline spray to help keep your nose and airways clear. Recovery is typically one to two weeks. But for high-risk groups, RSV can cause severe respiratory infection, pneumonia and even death.

“High risk is usually children less than five years, adults greater than 65 or if you have comorbidities,” High explains. But, she stresses that the virus can hit all ages. In fact, High says each year in the United States, 60,000 to 100,000 adults will go to the hospital with RSV. Six thousand to 10,000 will die.

Winter 2023-2024 RSV vaccine latest

High says [GlaxoSmithKline plc](#) (88% effective) and [Pfizer](#) (85% effective) have RSV vaccines on the market. She says during the current RSV season, the vaccine is recommended for a few groups:

- Adults greater than 65 years
- Adults with conditions like diabetes, lung and heart issues, autoimmune disease, cancer or who live in long-term care facilities
- Infants less than eight months
- Children eight to 19 months with conditions like premature birth and lung disease
- Pregnant women who are 32 to 36 weeks along.

For pregnant women, High recommends both the mom and the baby, once born, get the shot.

“Antibodies, which are how our body fights off infection, get produced in pregnant women. And I’m certain she passes that along to the baby,” High says. “But the child will get better protection if they get the RSV vaccination, as well.”

High recommends talking to your local public health department or a local pharmacy to see if the RSV vaccine is available near you. The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website](#) also has information.

“A lot of vaccines have been thrown at us the last couple years. People may be hesitant,” High says. “But the RSV vaccine is a good one. I would recommend it.”

General vaccine best practices

High says now is the time to get vaccinated. If you're busy, you can get multiple vaccines at once. But if possible, High recommends spacing them out. Talk to your primary care provider or the provider who gives the shot about when you can get your next vaccine.

"You may have more fatigue, low-grade fever and more soreness at the injection site," if you get multiple vaccines at one time, High says. "You might be putting your body in overdrive. In turn, the body might be like 'OK, which antibodies do I make? We have three different suspects.'

"You want to make sure you're creating the best opportunity to have your body create a defense mechanism against these viruses," High adds.

And a reminder: if you don't have symptoms after a vaccine, that doesn't mean it's not working. Everyone reacts differently.

High says insurance will typically cover the cost of the RSV vaccine, but there may be an administrative fee in some cases. If you have questions about this or any vaccine, talk to your primary care provider or insurance provider.

The future

The flu vaccine is a once-a-year shot, and the COVID-19 vaccine is trending that way, too. What about RSV? High believes the RSV shot will eventually become a once-a-year thing for all ages.

"That's how you're best going to create immunity for everyone," High says.

Health care organizations will let you know when vaccine guidance changes. For now, though, take steps to stay healthy this winter. Be up to date on vaccines. Commit to healthy habits, whether that's daily activities like exercise and healthy eating or "as it happens" precautions like sneezing into your arm instead of the open air.