

# New defenses against RSV for vulnerable seniors, babies

**By Courtney Honken**

Respiratory syncytial virus, a common illness that can affect people of all ages, can be more serious for older adults, pregnant individuals and babies.

People get sick with RSV during the typical cold and flu season, roughly November through March. It spreads through droplets from coughing or sneezing. You can also catch it by touching a surface that has the virus and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

The best way to prevent spreading this virus is by washing your hands frequently, covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze and wearing a mask in public. Common symptoms include runny nose, fever, cough, sneezing and feeling less hungry. When babies are sick with RSV, they may be more fussy, less active and could have pauses in their breathing.

Fortunately, scientists have developed ways to help protect people most at risk from RSV. We now have a special RSV vaccine for older adults and pregnant people and a treatment called monoclonal antibodies for babies.

Let's begin with the RSV vaccine. Older adults and pregnant people sometimes face more challenges in fighting off infections like RSV. The vaccine acts as a shield against the virus. Unlike traditional vaccines that use weakened forms of the virus, this vaccine helps the body recognize and defend against RSV more effectively. Its goal is to prevent severe problems, such as difficulty breathing or hospitalization. For adults 60 and older, there are two vaccines approved by the Food and Drug Administration: Arexvy and Abrysvo. Both are given as one lifetime shot.

Only Abrysvo is approved for pregnant individuals.

When pregnant people receive the RSV vaccine, their bodies produce protective tools called antibodies. These antibodies not only help the mother but also pass through the placenta to provide the baby with protection. It's like giving the baby added defense against RSV during the crucial first few months of life when they are most vulnerable.

Now, let's discuss monoclonal antibodies for babies. Babies, especially those born prematurely or with health issues, can get very sick from RSV. However, scientists have developed special antibodies to combat RSV. Doctors can give babies these antibodies to help them fight off RSV if they are at risk. It offers extra support when needed the most. Nirsevimab is recommended for all babies who are less than six months old during RSV season and for higher risk children up to 19 months old. Palivizumab is recommended for certain babies who are higher risk. Talk with your doctor about which one would be recommended for your kiddo.

Medicare Part D, the prescription drug plan, covers the cost of the recommended RSV vaccine, which is available at some local medical clinics and pharmacies. Montana Medicaid also covers the vaccine as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In summary, the new RSV vaccine for older adults and pregnant people, along with monoclonal antibodies for babies, are significant steps forward in RSV prevention. I encourage you to speak with your healthcare provider about these valuable tools for your health and safety.

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