



What You Need to Know: RSV Vaccines for Older Adults (60+)

Respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, is a virus that causes infections of the lungs and breathing passages. It is highly contagious (easy to get from other people). In older adults, RSV is a common cause of a lung disease which can cause life-threatening pneumonia. The RSV vaccine can help older adults at risk of RSV.

There are two different RSV vaccines used for adults 60 years old or older. One is from Pfizer and one is from GSK. You can receive either vaccine.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults 60 years old or older should work with their healthcare professional to decide whether to get the RSV vaccine. You should have a discussion with your healthcare professional where you weigh potential vaccine benefits and harms, risk for serious RSV disease, and unknowns to decide together whether you should get the RSV vaccine.

Your healthcare professional will help you decide whether to get the RSV vaccine:

- Older adults should ask their healthcare professional whether or not they should be given the RSV vaccine
- Your healthcare professional will consider your risk factors for getting seriously sick from RSV and your current health status when helping you decide whether to get the vaccine

The RSV vaccine has both harms and benefits.

Getting an RSV shot can provide the following benefits:

- You are less likely to get RSV
- If you do get RSV, you are less likely to get seriously sick

Potential harms of getting an RSV shot include:

- Some people who received the vaccine have experienced serious neurological events after receiving the vaccine. However, the majority of people who have received the RSV vaccine did not experience those harms.

Unknown issues:

- There is not enough information about how well the vaccine works in adults older than 75, people who are frail, or people who live in long-term care facilities.

Your healthcare professional will help you weigh whether the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the harms.

There are some cautions about when to take the RSV vaccine:

- If you have ever been allergic to any of the ingredients in the RSV vaccine, you should not get the RSV shot
- If you are currently sick (whether or not you have a fever), you should wait to get the RSV shot until you are feeling better

If you get the RSV vaccine, some possible side effects include:

- Pain, redness, or swelling in the location where you received the shot
- Tiredness, aches in your body or joints, fever, nausea, or diarrhea after receiving the shot
- Most people who get an RSV shot do not have any serious problems with it. Most side effects are mild and usually go away within a few days

If you and your healthcare professional decide you should get the RSV vaccine, it's best to get your shot in the fall. If you did not get vaccinated in the fall, you can—and should—get the RSV shot at any time of year.

RSV vaccines are covered by Medicare Part D, but they may not be currently covered by Medicare Part B. Private insurers can individually decide whether to cover the RSV vaccine.

Background

RSV is a serious disease, especially for older adults. It causes an infection of the lungs similar to the flu. Most cases of serious RSV are found in older adults, and older adults who get RSV are at greater risk of hospitalization or even death.

Each year, RSV causes up to 10,000 deaths and up to 160,000 hospitalizations of adults 65 and older in the US. Because our immune systems weaken with age, people aged 65 and older can have more serious illness than younger people.

RSV can cause a number of symptoms that might seem like a cold at first, such as a runny nose, sore throat, or a cough. However, RSV can get worse and lead to other serious conditions, such as:

- Worsening symptoms if you already have asthma or COPD
- Pneumonia
- An infection of the lungs called bronchiolitis
- Congestive heart failure

Unlike the flu shot, your healthcare professional will consider your risk for disease and your characteristics, values, and preferences, the characteristics of the vaccine, and the healthcare professional's own judgment. It may be more likely that your healthcare professional will recommend the RSV vaccine if you have a condition that makes serious disease more likely, such as lung, heart, kidney, or liver diseases, diabetes, or problems with your immune system.



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The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

DISCLAIMER: This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. September 2023

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