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UK Ramps Up RSV Vaccination Campaign Ahead of Winter to Protect Vulnerable Groups

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The United Kingdom is stepping up its vaccination efforts against respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in preparation for an anticipated surge in cases during the colder months. Following a sharp rise in RSV infections during Australia's winter season, health officials are urging at-risk populations, including pregnant women and older adults, to take preventive action.

RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, is a common yet highly contagious respiratory virus that can cause bronchiolitis, inflammation of the small airways in the lungs in young children. While most healthy adults experience only mild symptoms, RSV can lead to severe illness in

infants and people over the age of 75. It is also recognized as one of the leading causes of hospital admissions among children worldwide.

Data from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), the national body tasked with protecting public health from infectious threats, show that RSV-related hospitalizations in children last winter accounted for nearly 7,000 bed days in England. In response, the National Health Service (NHS) is intensifying its public health messaging and vaccination efforts ahead of the flu season.

Kate Brintworth, Chief Midwifery Officer for NHS England, emphasized the importance of maternal immunization. “Getting vaccinated while pregnant is the best way to protect your baby from the moment they are born,” she stated. “Now is the time for moms to act, to make sure their babies are protected ahead of their first few months this winter, when there tends to be more bugs circulating.”

Expectant mothers are eligible to receive the RSV vaccine from 28 weeks of pregnancy through maternity services or general practice (GP) clinics. According to UKHSA research, receiving the vaccine at least two weeks before birth can reduce the risk of hospitalization in newborns by 72%.

The vaccination program is also targeting older adults, particularly those aged 75 to 79. Eligible individuals are being contacted through mail, text messages, email, and the NHS App. With an effectiveness rate of approximately 82% in preventing hospital admissions among seniors, the vaccine is seen as a critical tool in the country’s winter immunization strategy.

To broaden access, around 100 community pharmacies in areas including the East of England and the Midlands are currently offering the RSV vaccine, with NHS England planning to add 150 more locations. The expansion focuses on improving accessibility in underserved regions.

In addition, many of these pharmacies are also providing the pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine to pregnant women. This dual offering is intended to boost vaccination rates and alleviate strain on GP practices.

The NHS is continuing to encourage pregnant women to consider seasonal vaccinations, including flu and pertussis, both of which have demonstrated effectiveness in protecting the

health of mothers and newborns during winter.

Health officials hope these preventative efforts will help ease pressure on healthcare services and safeguard those most at risk, as RSV activity is expected to increase during the colder months.