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UK Expands RSV Vaccine Rollout to Protect Vulnerable Populations Before Winter Surge

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The United Kingdom is expanding access to the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccine as it prepares for a potential rise in cases during the upcoming winter months. With Australia experiencing a sharp increase in RSV infections during its recent winter, British health officials are urging early action to protect at-risk groups, including pregnant women and older adults.

RSV is a highly contagious respiratory virus that can lead to bronchiolitis, an inflammation of the small airways in the lungs, especially in infants. While it usually causes only mild, cold-

like symptoms in healthy individuals, RSV can result in serious complications in babies and seniors, particularly those aged 75 and older. Globally, RSV remains one of the leading causes of pediatric hospital admissions.

According to the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), which oversees responses to infectious disease threats, nearly 7,000 pediatric bed days in England were attributed to RSV-related hospitalizations last winter. In response, the National Health Service (NHS) is reinforcing its seasonal vaccination strategy to reduce hospital burden and protect the most vulnerable.

Kate Brintworth, Chief Midwifery Officer for NHS England, encouraged expectant mothers to act early. “Getting vaccinated while pregnant is the best way to protect your baby from the moment they are born,” Brintworth said. “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.”

The maternal RSV vaccine is available through general practice (GP) clinics and maternity services from 28 weeks of pregnancy. Studies from the UKHSA show the vaccine can reduce hospital admissions in newborns by up to 72% when administered at least 14 days before delivery.

The campaign also targets older adults, with a focus on individuals aged 75 to 79. Vaccine invitations are being sent through postal mail, text messages, email, and the NHS App. Clinical data indicates the vaccine is approximately 82% effective in preventing hospitalizations in this age group.

To expand reach, NHS England has partnered with around 100 community pharmacies, mainly in the East of England and the Midlands, to offer RSV vaccinations. An additional 150 sites are expected to be added in the coming weeks, prioritizing areas with reduced access to general healthcare services.

These pharmacies will also administer the pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine to eligible pregnant women, streamlining immunization efforts and easing the load on GP appointments.

The NHS continues to recommend flu and pertussis vaccines alongside RSV immunization as part of a comprehensive winter protection plan for expectant mothers. These vaccines

have demonstrated consistent effectiveness in safeguarding the health of both mothers and infants during the colder seasons.

Health authorities hope that early and widespread uptake of RSV vaccination will reduce the strain on healthcare resources while offering critical protection to high-risk groups as seasonal infections increase.