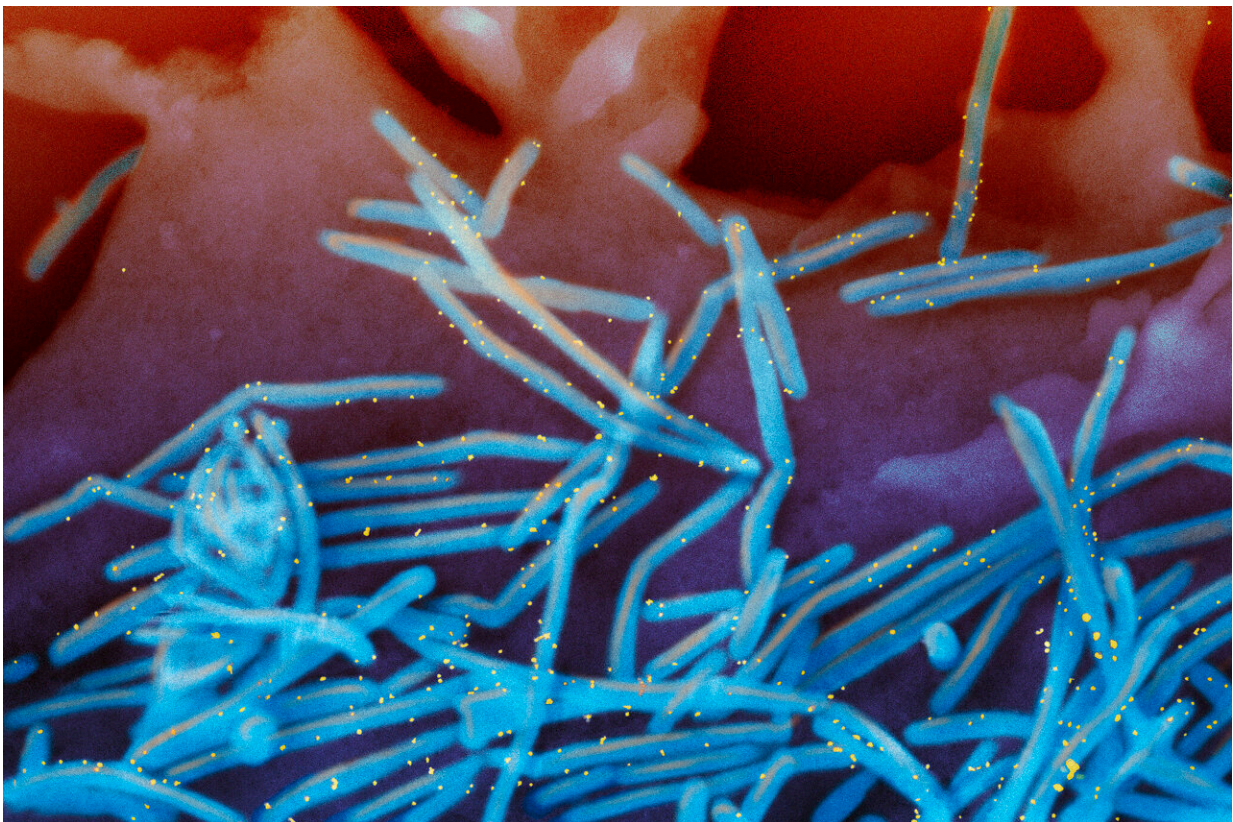


# RSV is straining some hospitals, and US officials are releasing more shots for newborns

November 17 2023, by MIKE STOBBE and KENYA HUNTER

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This electron microscope image provided by the National Institutes of Health shows human respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) virions, colorized blue, and anti-RSV F protein/gold antibodies, colorized yellow, shedding from the surface of human lung cells. RSV infections are rising sharply in some parts of the country, nearly filling hospital emergency departments in Georgia, Texas and some other states. To help counter the surge, federal officials on Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023,

announced they were releasing 77,000 doses of a new RSV shot for newborns that have been in short supply. Credit: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, NIH via AP, File

RSV infections are rising sharply in some parts of the country, nearly filling hospital emergency departments in Georgia, Texas and some other states.

To help counter the surge, [federal officials](#) on Thursday announced they were releasing more doses of a new RSV shot for newborns that have been in short supply.

Reports of the seasonal virus are rising nationally, but experts said RSV is not expected to generate the kind of widespread patient traffic seen last fall, when hospitals were overwhelmed with sick, wheezing kids.

Nevertheless, cases will likely rise in more parts of the country and infections may be intense in some places, said Dr. Meredith McMorrow, an RSV expert at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At Cook Children's Medical Center in Fort Worth, Texas, Dr. Laura Romano said kids and parents are spending 10 or more hours in the emergency department's waiting room. Kids are presenting sicker than they have in previous years, with more in need of oxygen, Romano said.

"Last week, we had 25 kids who were waiting in the [emergency room](#) who had been admitted for a bed upstairs, including five who needed to go to our intensive care unit," she said. "We just do not have beds for them."

In Georgia, the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta hospital system is in

"surge" mode because of RSV, with a high volume of patients straining staff, said Dr. Jim Fortenberry, the system's chief medical officer.

"Our emergency departments, our urgent cares are extremely busy. The pediatricians' offices are extremely busy too," Fortenberry said.

Not helping matters: The newly available shots to protect newborns against RSV have been difficult to get, meaning a new medical weapon is not being fully deployed.

"It was really going to help and unfortunately there is a shortage, and we at Children's are also seeing that shortage," Fortenberry said.

RSV, or [respiratory syncytial virus](#), is a common cause of mild cold-like symptoms such as runny nose, cough and fever.

Still, it can be dangerous for infants and [older people](#). The [CDC estimates](#) that RSV causes 100 to 300 deaths and 58,000 to 80,000 hospitalizations each year among kids aged 4 and under. It is the No. 1 cause of hospitalizations in U.S. infants, according to the CDC.

Its toll is even greater in adults 65 and older, causing 6,000 to 10,000 deaths and 60,000 to 160,000 hospitalizations, the CDC says.

RSV infections fell during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic—a time when many kids and adults stayed home and took precautions against respiratory viruses.

But it roared back last year. Hospitals were filled with wheezing children, many of them needing oxygen or even machines to help them breathe. The wave was bolstered by surges in other kinds of respiratory viruses, which often infected children at the same time and made their condition worse, said McMorro, of the CDC.

Some of those other viruses are circulating now, too. Data on RSV is limited, but available information shows that diagnoses in some states—including [Georgia](#), [Tennessee](#) and [Virginia](#)—are near the levels seen last year. [Texas](#) has also seen a sharp rise in cases, the data suggests.

There are signs, however, that the virus is already peaking in some of those states, McMorrow said. Nationally, detections of RSV are only about [half as high](#) as they were last November.

Based on the data so far, CDC officials think the current season will not be as bad as last year and will end up comparable to the kind of RSV seasons that occurred regularly before the COVID-19 pandemic, she said.

Health officials are armed with new options to fight RSV, including a vaccine for people 60 and older and a different one for pregnant women.

Also, the CDC recommended in August that babies younger than 8 months before their first RSV season be given a new shot of lab-made antibodies.

Sold under the brand name Beyfortus, the drug was developed by AstraZeneca and Sanofi. It comes in prefilled syringes in two doses, one for smaller infants and a bigger dose for larger, heavier infants.

But demand has outpaced supply, prompting the CDC last month to ask doctors to prioritize doses for infants at highest risk of severe RSV disease.

Part of the problem: The shots' list price is about \$400 to \$500 per dose and some doctors were wary of ordering many syringes until they were certain insurance programs would fully reimburse them, said Dr. James Campbell, a University of Maryland pediatric infectious diseases expert.

Some doctors ordered a lot anyway, which is why it's been more available from some health care providers than others, he said.

On Thursday, the CDC announced that more than 77,000 additional doses of the larger sized shots would be distributed to doctors and hospitals.

Future RSV seasons may be better, said Campbell, the vice chair of an American Academy of Pediatrics committee on infectious diseases.

"Up until this year, we had nothing to prevent RSV," he said.

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