

Raising awareness of RSV as part of your vaccine preventable respiratory diseases in Canada

Consensus Statement and Recommendations

29 November 2024

As Canada faces a rapidly ageing population alongside the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the urgency for effective vaccination strategies has never been greater. Vaccination is a vital preventative measure to protect the health of older adults and other at-risk populations.

Respiratory syncytial virus, more commonly known as RSV, is a common but often underestimated respiratory virus that can lead to severe illness, especially in older adults, infants, and those with compromised immune systems. While many experience mild symptoms similar to a common cold, RSV can escalate to serious conditions like pneumonia or bronchiolitis, inflaming the small airways and severely impacting lung function.

According to the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs, by 2025, the number of RSV cases in older adults in high-income countries could be as high as 10.9 million, resulting in as many as 800,000 hospitalizations and 74,000 deaths. Alarmingly, vaccination rates remain low, with only 30% of adults indicating an intention to receive the newly approved RSV vaccine, according to the Government of Canada's 2023-2024 Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Coverage Survey. Common barriers to vaccination include skepticism about the immune system's ability to respond and concerns about vaccine safety and side effects.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) has emphasized the urgent need for RSV immunization programs targeting older adults, particularly those aged 75 and older, as well as high-risk individuals and residents of long-term care facilities. Despite these recommendations, publicly funded RSV programs and public awareness efforts lag behind those of other vaccine-preventable respiratory diseases, such as influenza and COVID-19. This gap not only puts individuals at greater risk but also places significant strain on public health systems and local communities. Provinces and territories are urged to prioritize and continue funding the RSV vaccine for older adults, at-risk groups, and other vulnerable populations as part of their immunization agendas. There is a clear need for increased awareness and expanded immunization efforts.

On September 10, 2024, the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) hosted an interactive dialogue titled "Raising Awareness of RSV as part of your Vaccine-Preventable Respiratory Diseases in Canada." This event brought together representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and professional organizations to address strategies for improving RSV vaccination rates and bridging knowledge gaps.

This consensus statement presents key issues and recommendations arising from this dialogue to enhance awareness and advocacy for RSV vaccination:

1. Improving RSV Vaccination Policy for Older Adults

With the release of national recommendations on RSV vaccination in older adults, provinces and territories are urged to respond by adding and continuing RSV vaccination policies to their provincial/territorial immunization programs. Provinces and territories across Canada have a responsibility to ensure RSV vaccination is available and accessible to protect the health of older adults. Additionally, increased funding for vaccination promotion and surveillance is essential to identify coverage gaps and address regional disparities, particularly in northern and remote areas where RSV-related hospitalizations are disproportionately high.

2. Increasing Public Awareness and Knowledge Translation

Currently, there is limited awareness amongst the general public on the consequences of RSV infection, who is at-risk and benefits of vaccination. Greater public understanding of RSV and its impact on at-risk adult populations is necessary to prevent disease and protect public health. Targeted outreach initiatives with community leaders in underserved regions particularly in rural areas and regions with high immigrant populations are crucial. Additionally, investing in educational campaigns and integrating RSV vaccination into the national vaccination plan, is crucial for developing and monitoring strategies to improve uptake among at-risk groups. Leveraging educational resources such as brochures, social media campaigns, and mobile clinics can significantly improve access and awareness on RSV vaccination.

3. Enhancing Healthcare Provider and Stakeholder Engagement

Healthcare providers and key stakeholders (e.g., NGOs, CSOs, patient and professionals' groups, etc.) play a pivotal role in promoting and sharing information on RSV vaccination. As the population continues to age, it is necessary for healthcare providers to receive comprehensive education on vaccination strategies tailored towards older adults. To improve RSV vaccine uptake, concerted effort is needed to translate this education into primary care practices and to support health care providers and civil society in their role as important influencers and sources of information on vaccination decisions.

In conclusion, it is essential to raise awareness and intensify advocacy efforts to improve RSV vaccination coverage. Governments and policymakers must focus on strategies that enhance vaccine uptake and protect vulnerable populations. As the winter season approaches, it is crucial to implement these recommendations to reduce the burden of RSV-related diseases and strengthen public health outcomes across Canada.

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