

Ensuring Access to Lifesaving Child Immunizations

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) is proposing legislation that would update the definition of “vaccine” in statute ([RCW 70.290](#)) in order to include a new CDC-recommended immunization that will protect against Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) in infants and toddlers. This change would allow the new product, nirsevimab, to be available through the existing universal childhood vaccine program. It does not change any other immunization policies or vaccine requirements and is not an immunization mandate.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus

RSV is a seasonal, highly contagious virus that affects 97% of children by the age of 2¹. Low-income children of color are at high risk of severe RSV². The virus can be dangerous for many infants:

- RSV is the leading cause of hospitalization for infants less than a year old.³ Each year in the United States, an estimated 58,000-80,000 children younger than 5 years are hospitalized due to RSV infection.⁴
- RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small airways in the lungs) and pneumonia in children younger than 1⁵ and it increases long-term risks of developing asthma.⁶
- Each year RSV leads to approximately 100–300 deaths in children younger than 5 years old in the United States.⁷

A powerful new tool to protect against RSV

Nirsevimab, administered as a single injection, is **shown to reduce the risk of hospitalizations and healthcare visits for RSV in infants by about 80 percent.**

A statute change is necessary to:

- Strike out narrow language that excludes current immunization practices
- Align with: ACIP recommendations; Affordable Care Act (ACA) statutes; VFC’s definition of vaccine (September 2023); and Washington state’s Office of the Insurance Commissioner rules.⁸
- Ensure the WVA’s legal authority aligns with the statute’s original intent to provide recommended vaccines to all children.

Health equity and access

This change would promote health equity by ensuring access and affordability of nirsevimab for all Washington state infants, including those at greatest risk of severe RSV disease. Updating the statutory definition would also support health care providers by preventing the administrative and financial barriers of needing to purchase the vaccine outright, especially challenging for medical practices that are also small businesses.

- ¹ RSV and Infants: a Respiratory Disease That Can Be Deadly.” American Lung Association. October 20, 2021. <https://www.lung.org/blog/about-rsv-and-infants>
- ² “RSV Health Equity Action Report.” National Minority Quality Forum. August 23 2023. https://rsvequityaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/RSV_Report.pdf
- ³ “RSV in Infants and Young Children.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 21 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/high-risk/infants-young-children.html>
- ⁴ “RSV in Infants and Young Children.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 21 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/high-risk/infants-young-children.html>
- ⁵ “RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus).” Yale Medicine. August 21 2023. <https://www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/rsv-respiratory-syncytial-virus>
- ⁶ “Is there a link between RSV and asthma development?” Rachel Zimlich, RN, BSN. Contemporary Pediatrics, September 3, 2019. <https://www.contemporarypediatrics.com/view/there-link-between-rsv-and-asthma-development>
- ⁷ Mortality Associated With Influenza and Respiratory Syncytial Virus in the US, February 1, 2022. [Mortality Associated With Influenza and Respiratory Syncytial Virus in the US, 1999-2018 | Public Health | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network](#)
- ⁸ Align with: ACIP recommendations; Affordable Care Act (ACA) statutes ([42 U.S.C. §300gg-13](#) and [29 CFR § 2590.715-2713](#)); VFC’s September definition of vaccine; and Washington state’s Office of the Insurance Commissioner rules ([WAC 284-43-5640](#) and [WAC 284-43-5642](#))