Kids, Pregnancy, and the Latest on COVID-19 Vaccines

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With schools back in full swing, fall activities underway, and children gathered once again in classrooms and other indoor settings, parents—including those who are pregnant—have renewed questions about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. MotherToBaby is seeing an increase in questions from pregnant women who want to protect themselves and their families as much as possible. Although more and more women are confident about getting vaccinated against COVID-19 in pregnancy, we continue to get questions about vaccine safety, as well as inquiries about eligibility for the updated boosters. MotherToBaby has teamed up with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to give you the latest about vaccination for those who are pregnant and for children.

What is the current impact of COVID-19 and pregnancy?

At this point in the pandemic, we know the importance of taking steps to help prevent a COVID-19 infection in pregnancy. Research has shown that women who are pregnant have a higher chance of becoming very sick, being admitted to intensive care, and needing to be put on a ventilator if they get COVID-19. Some studies have reported a slightly higher chance of death. Researchers have also found increased chances of adverse effects on the pregnancy itself, including preterm delivery, stillbirth, and complications such as preeclampsia.

The good news is, a recent study found that pregnant women who received two doses of an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine had lower rates of stillbirth than those who were unvaccinated. Furthermore, those who also received a booster had lower rates of infection, hospitalization, and pregnancy complications related to COVID-19 than those who received only the two primary doses. This finding is reassuring that staying up to date on the vaccines provides good protection in pregnancy in case of a breakthrough infection.

Why should women who are pregnant and those trying to expand their families consider getting vaccinated against COVID-19?

Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself against getting seriously ill, being hospitalized, and dying from COVID-19. This is true for everyone, but especially for those who are pregnant and others who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19. Getting vaccinated during pregnancy has the added benefit of passing antibodies to the developing baby, which has been shown to lower the baby's chances of infection or hospitalization with COVID-19 during the first few months of life.

For those planning a pregnancy, the preconception period is a great time to become up to date on recommended immunizations, including COVID-19 vaccines. This helps ensure that future pregnancies will start out as protected as possible from COVID-19 and other vaccine-preventable illnesses. CDC has helpful information here about vaccines before pregnancy: https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pregnancy/vacc-before.html.

What are the long-term effects on the baby when a person gets a COVID-19 vaccine during pregnancy?

It will take time to follow the children of women who were vaccinated in pregnancy to be able to answer this question with data. However, based on what is known about how these and other vaccines work, getting a COVID-19 vaccine during pregnancy is not expected to cause long-term problems for the child. In fact, a pregnancy that stays up to date on the vaccines is more protected and less likely to have complications from COVID-19 that could affect a child's future growth and development, such as preterm delivery. In addition, studies have demonstrated antibody protection for the infant following vaccination during pregnancy. And, of course, vaccination during pregnancy will continue to protect the parent after delivery while they are caring for their newborn.

Should women who are pregnant get an updated booster?

It is common for vaccines to be updated over time to give better protection against new variants spreading in the community, just as the flu shot is updated every year to provide the best protection against current strains of influenza. The updated COVID-19 booster, which gives added protection against the Omicron variant, is also referred to as bivalent. Women who are pregnant should receive this latest booster for the most up-to-date protection against COVID-19. CDC and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists strongly recommend that pregnant women stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines, including booster doses.

Like most other people, women who are pregnant are eligible for the updated booster if they have completed a primary COVID-19 vaccine series and it has been at least two months since their last dose (primary or booster). The updated booster can be given in any trimester of pregnancy. Anyone who has had a recent COVID-19 infection can consider delaying the booster by up to 3 months from the time their symptoms started or they tested positive.

Are COVID-19 vaccinations recommended for breastfeeding?

Studies have found that the components of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines are unlikely to enter the breast milk, and no serious side effects have been reported for the breastfed baby. In rare cases, there may be a temporary reduction in milk supply when a person gets an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine, but reassuringly, supply is expected to return to normal within a day or two. In more good news, antibodies against the virus that causes COVID-19 have been found in the breast milk of women who have been vaccinated with mRNA COVID-19 vaccines while breastfeeding. This is a promising finding, although more research is needed to know how much and for how long these antibodies might protect a breastfeeding child against the virus.

CDC, the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine, and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that women who are breastfeeding stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines, including booster doses.

What resources help pregnant women make informed decisions about protecting themselves and their families against COVID-19?

For questions about COVID-19 vaccines and other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding, talk with your healthcare provider or contact a MotherToBaby specialist. You can find MotherToBaby resources on COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines at https://mothertobaby.org/pregnancy-breastfeeding-exposures/covid-19/.

For guidance surrounding kids, we'll turn to Leandris C. Liburd, PhD, MPH, the Associate Director for Minority Health and Health Equity for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

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