COVID-19, the Flu, and Zika: Considerations for Pregnancy in the Winter Travel Season

It's that time of year again, when the holidays invite family gatherings, and colder, shorter days make us long for sunny destinations. Yes, the winter travel season is upon us! Remember winters past when COVID-19 wasn't around and we'd never heard of Zika? When we didn't give much thought to health concerns related to hopping on a plane or going to busy holiday venues? Things are different now. If you're pregnant, you might pause before booking airline tickets or RSVPing "yes" to that extended family reunion. Take a moment to consider the possible risks associated with your plans, and how you might reduce them (by taking precautions) or eliminate them (by making alternate plans instead). Here are a few things to think about:

COVID-19:

Try as we might, we can't escape it or wish it away. We are, in fact, still in the middle of a pandemic, with new variants appearing and cases still rising and falling unpredictably in most places. Traveling on public transportation (such as airplanes, ships, trains, subways, taxis, and ride shares) can make getting and spreading COVID-19 more likely. So can being in crowded indoor spaces, especially if not everyone in those spaces is fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and/or wearing a mask. Having COVID-19 in pregnancy can increase pregnancy risks such as stillbirth and preterm delivery. So, how can you eliminate or reduce your chance of exposure to the virus?

- **Avoid public transportation.** If you must travel, using your own vehicle with members of your own household is the safest bet. Using drive-thrus or packing your own food to stop and eat along the way is safer than eating in crowded restaurants full of other holiday travelers.

- If you must travel on a plane or use other public transportation, **wear a well-fitting mask** the whole time (this is required), **stay at least 6 feet away** from other travelers when possible, and **wash your hands**/use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently. Most importantly, make sure you're **fully vaccinated** before you travel, including getting a booster dose when you're eligible.

- Did I mention making sure you're **FULLY VACCINATED** before travel? It's the single best way to reduce the chance of getting very sick if you're exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19. Pregnancy and being very sick don't go well together, so this one is really, really important, whether you're traveling or not. MotherToBaby has helpful resources on the COVID-19 vaccines and booster shot, and you can contact us to talk through any questions or concerns you may have about getting the vaccine.

- Even if you're fully vaccinated, you might still consider **wearing a mask indoors** during holiday gatherings (and elsewhere), especially if you're getting together with people from different households coming from different places. If everyone else at the gathering also wears a mask indoors, even better.

- Find more tips and information about safer holiday celebrations and travel in the time of COVID at this link: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays/celebrations.html.

Influenza (the Flu):

Flu season carries its own risks for people who are pregnant. Like COVID-19, having the flu during pregnancy increases the chance of being very sick compared to people who aren't pregnant. Many of the same precautions that apply to COVID-19 apply to the flu as well:

- **Get the flu shot.** Like the COVID-19 vaccine, the flu shot can be given at any time during pregnancy, and can even be given at the same time as a COVID vaccine or booster. The sooner you're vaccinated, the sooner you and your pregnancy will have good protection against becoming very sick from the flu. And (bonus!) getting vaccinated in pregnancy may pass some protective antibodies to your developing baby.
- **Avoiding public transportation and crowded indoor spaces** will also reduce your chance of exposure to the flu virus. **Washing your hands frequently**/using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer is also an excellent flu prevention technique.

Zika:

Yes, Zika is still around. There are no known "outbreaks" of Zika anywhere in the world at this time, but there is ongoing, low-level, sporadic transmission in some places. Having Zika during pregnancy increases the chance of serious and lifelong effects for a developing baby. There is no vaccine against the Zika virus.

- The safest course in pregnancy (or if you're trying to conceive) is to **avoid travel** to places with a chance of exposure. Unfortunately, it's virtually impossible now to know the exact risk of being exposed to Zika in any given country, but if you must travel, you can use the CDC's Zika map to help you plan.
- If you travel,**use insect repellent** and take other precautions to help avoid mosquito bites, such as wearing long sleeves and pants. If your partner travels with you, take steps to **avoid sexual transmission of Zika**. If you're planning a pregnancy, follow the recommended wait times (2 months for women, 3 months for men) before trying to conceive.

Other infections:

If you're considering international travel, there may be other infections to consider, such as malaria and foodborne illnesses. You might also need other vaccines, so be sure to review the current vaccine recommendations for your

destination. Some vaccines can be given during pregnancy, but it's a good idea to check with your healthcare provider or contact MotherToBaby to discuss the risks and benefits of specific vaccines as you're deciding about travel.

Medical concerns:

Other travel considerations include the increased chance of blood clots during travel if you're pregnant, and where you will receive medical care in case of unexpected preterm labor or another medical emergency. Before any travel, be sure to talk with your healthcare provider about any additional considerations that are specific to you and your pregnancy.

Given all these considerations, if you're pregnant you might decide this year is a good one to enjoy low-key holidays at home and save the travel for another time. However you decide to spend the season, we hope it's safe, healthy, and happy!

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Holiday festivities sometimes include eating foods and drinks that might not be part of our everyday diet. During pregnancy and breastfeeding, we need to give a little more thought to what we should eat and drink. "Is it ok for the baby?" often goes through our minds during these times. As a teratogen information specialist at MotherToBaby who answers a lot of the questions we get via our texting service (855-999-3525), these types of questions ramp up during

this time of year! So, here's some insight...

Popular Holiday Food & Drinks

Eggnog & Other Holiday Beverages

Eggnog seems to be a part of many holiday parties. Always be sure to check if the eggnog is homemade or not. Does it contain raw eggs, which can carry bacteria such as salmonella? If the eggnog was commercially made and packaged, then usually the eggs have been pasteurized, and the product may even have been heated prior to packaging. Also, always remember to check if the eggnog contains a little "holiday cheer" (i.e., alcohol) or not. It is common to add rum to eggnog, and we want to avoid alcohol when pregnant or breastfeeding (see our Alcohol Fact Sheet for more info). Other common holiday beverages include mulled wine, wassail, hot buttered rum, and of course wine and champagne. All of these contain alcohol as well, so it is best to avoid them and just stick with mocktails and non-alcoholic punch.

Smoked Salmon & Fruit

"Smoked salmon tastes wonderful on crackers with cream cheese! But is it ok during pregnancy?" one woman texted me. Here's what I told her. Smoked salmon is still considered raw fish as it is cured rather than cooked, so should be avoided during pregnancy due to the risk of foodborne illnesses. If the salmon has been heated to steaming, any concern for bacteria has been reduced. See our Fact Sheet on Eating Raw, Undercooked, or Cold Meats and Seafood for more info. Sometimes you will find foods that contain meats that have been dried, such as beef jerky. Although beef jerky is high in salt, there are not any other known risks to eating this tasty food during pregnancy.

"What about a fruit plate containing papaya and pineapple? Are there some worries about eating those fruits during pregnancy?" another texter wrote. Both fruits do contain enzymes that have been thought to induce labor. Papaya contains papain, while pineapple contains bromelain. Yet when eaten at normal levels (not daily!), these delicious fruits have not been shown to have any negative effect on a pregnancy. Of course, we hope the fruit has been well-washed before cutting and serving!

Eggplant Parmesan

"When the main dish is served, can we enjoy the amazing eggplant parmesan? Or what about eggplant ratatouille?" Eggplant is low in calories and high in fiber. Do avoid eating it raw, but cooked eggplant can be an occasional part of your diet. The concern is that eggplant is part of the Nightshade family and contains alkaloids in the leaves and tubers that can be toxic. But eating the fruit alone has not been shown to have any risks during pregnancy, especially when cooked.

Tiramisu

"Will rounding out our holiday meal with a delicious dessert such as tiramisu need to wait until after pregnancy and

breastfeeding?" Traditional tiramisu contains two forms of alcohol, both Marsala wine and rum. Plus, liberal amounts of caffeine in the form of coffee and espresso. We have already mentioned that alcohol should be avoided if pregnant or breastfeeding, but what about the caffeine? Low to moderate levels of caffeine use (200 to 300 mg per day) has not been shown to increase any risks during pregnancy. See our Caffeine Fact Sheet for more info.

Who knew that holiday menus could need extra thought and consideration during pregnancy and breastfeeding?! Plus, with the added stress of COVID-19 this year, and the warnings to avoid large gatherings, you may have even more questions now than ever. Hopefully, this information will equip you to sit back, relax, and enjoy the festivities!

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Chelsea's chat came through late on a Wednesday afternoon: "Hi, I'm 23 weeks pregnant and have plans to visit my family in a different state this holiday season. My sister just had a baby and is breastfeeding, and my grandparents will also be there, so I want to be as safe as possible with COVID-19 still spreading. What do you think I should do?"

With Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa all quickly approaching, questions like this are coming into our chat service more frequently. We're living in a new normal, and in the midst of rising COVID-19 case counts throughout much of the country, we're all trying to figure out the safest way to celebrate with our loved ones this year.

I told Chelsea there were many individual factors that go into a decision like hers, but we could go over a few guiding principles to help her make an informed choice.

Stay Home When Possible

Staying local and celebrating in-person only with other members of your household is the safest approach this year. This is especially true for pregnant individuals, who the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers a group that is at "increased risk of severe illness" from COVID-19. While celebrating in such small numbers is certainly not how any of us want to spend the holidays, it's the best way to keep everyone safe. And if someone from outside of your immediate family really wants to join in on the fun – virtual get togethers are a great option!

Preparing to Travel

If it's not possible for you to stay home, then prepare, prepare, prepare! One of the most important things individuals can do this holiday season is prepare for their trip ahead of time. Most importantly, this means taking precautions to limit your own exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19 for 14 days before you plan to depart. This may include things like less frequent trips to the grocery store, keeping kids home and socially distancing them from their friends, working remotely when possible, and avoiding any pre-holiday gatherings. If you have to go on an important outing (such as a prenatal visit), keep in mind the prevention basics: wash your hands, maintain distance, and wear a mask.

Getting tested for COVID-19 is another way to reduce risk prior to gathering. This is especially important to do if you develop any symptoms that could be COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, etc.). The test itself is not perfect and any interaction you have after the test is completed would put you at risk of exposure again, but for some families having a negative COVID-19 test can be a helpful tool in the preparation toolbox.

Choosing how you travel will also be important this year. Driving to your destination is one way to limit your exposure to others and reduce the risk of getting sick in transit. If you have to fly, take a bus, or get on a train, you will likely be surrounded by many other people, which is more of a potential risk. Get your hand sanitizer and mask ready if you have to go this route!

One other important thing you can do before traveling? Get a flu shot (ideally at least 14 days ahead of time)! While it won't protect you from COVID-19, it will help prevent the flu, which can be serious for pregnant women. It will also help keep you from needing medical care, which is important since some communities are reaching max capacity in their hospitals and may not have room to admit you for treatment.

Think about Grandma

Next, you want to think about who you will be traveling to see. We know that certain individuals are more likely to get very sick and/or die from COVID-19. This includes older adults (with risk increasing with age) and those with underlying medical conditions such as type 2 diabetes, severe obesity, cancer, or pregnancy. Chelsea's grandparents were in their late 80's, and her grandma was also a smoker. She also had her new nephew to think about, and her sister who was breastfeeding. What seemed like a simple family gathering quickly became a lot more complex when everyone's health was assessed.

If you have a high-risk individual in your family, it's important that you consider their health when planning holiday travel. For some families, this may mean making the decision to break the wishbone virtually over FaceTime or Zoom. For others, it could mean a strict 14 day quarantine for all who will be gathering (discussed above) before any interactions take place.

Celebrating Safely

Whether Chelsea chooses to travel or stay close to home during the holidays, she can reduce the chance of coming into contact with the virus by continuing to take precautions while celebrating with others. Limiting activities to people in your own household obviously presents the least risk since you're already together anyway. But if you do host or attend gatherings with others, keep in mind that smaller groups in outdoor spaces where everyone wears a mask, stays at least 6 feet apart, and practices good hand hygiene is a much safer option than attending large indoor gatherings where not everyone wears a mask or follows other common sense precautions. Your decision to spend time around others should also consider the current spread of COVID-19 in the community where you live or where you will be traveling. I encouraged Chelsea to check the state department of health website for guidelines and recommendations for her destination.

What would a holiday celebration be without FOOD? You can still enjoy your favorite pregnancy-safe foods and beverages (no soft cheeses! no alcohol!), but you want to do what you can to reduce the chance of contact with any foodborne germs. Even though the chance of getting COVID-19 from contact with food or serving utensils is probably low, it's important that everyone wash their hands before preparing, serving, or eating food. Having only 1 or 2 people serve the food to everyone else while wearing a mask is a better choice than having lots of people handle the serving utensils or food containers. As yummy as potlucks or buffets can be, at least for this year it might be safer if each guest brings food and drinks for themselves and their own household members only, or picks up ready-to-serve items. In addition, since people clearly can't be masked and eat at the same time, plan ahead and get creative to create space between people when they sit down to eat – this year is definitely not the time to pile 12 people around a 6-person table! And as always, be sure that hot items are consumed hot, and cold items are consumed cold – no one wants a food-borne illness like E.coli or salmonella!

When the Party's Over

After attending any gatherings (even small ones) or staying with relatives, Chelsea will need to pay attention to any symptoms that could suggest possible COVID-19 infection. If she, or anyone else she spent time with, has symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19, she should contact her healthcare provider right away about testing and/or follow any instructions from her local health department. She will most likely need to self-isolate at home for 14 days. In addition, she should contact her hosts as soon as possible to let them know, so they can inform other guests and family members that they might have been exposed to the virus. Not fun, but a necessary part of helping keep us all healthy and safe throughout the holiday season.

Chelsea has a lot to consider this holiday season, as we all do. For more tips on celebrating safely during the holidays, visit the CDC's website on COVID-19 and holiday celebrations. And for more information about COVID-19 and pregnancy and breastfeeding, see our MotherToBaby fact sheet. However you choose to celebrate, we wish you a happy and healthy holiday season!

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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By Neely Cessac, Teratogen Information Specialist, MotherToBaby

The holidays are full of family, fun, and enjoyment – and the season is wonderful EVERY, SINGLE, DAY, right?! WRONG. Every year many pregnant women (as well as the general public) become so stressed and worried around this time. And rightly so…not only do pregnant moms have regular holiday stress, but they'll soon become moms! M-O-M-S! Holy cow. An overwhelming concept, to say the least, especially with everyone telling you what you can (or should) do and what you can't (or shouldn't) do during pregnancy. As a birth defects information specialist, I'm starting to get a ton of questions surrounding stress from moms-to-be. I can relate…and I'm not even pregnant yet!

I always want everything to be perfect, from clean floors and ceiling fans, to wonderfully wrapped presents and delicious food. Luckily my mom is an expert at all of those things, so I asked my mom how she survived the holidays while she was pregnant with me. Between my teratology expertise (the study of exposures that cause birth defects) and her "mom-ology" expertise (the study of being awesome in general, but especially as a mom), we've put together a list of some key questions and answers to help you survive the holidays too!

Survival Q #1: How can I avoid becoming too stressed?

- How you breathe is important! Be sure to take deep breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth, and relax.
- Realize you are not alone. Most pregnant women and women in general are feeling the same way you are. Talk to others; it will help reduce your feelings of stress.
- Take a nap! Escape and take a quick cat nap when you are really stressed and tired.
- Light to moderate non-impact exercise is great too. Try walking, swimming or yoga.

Survival Q #2: How can I avoid becoming too fatigued?

- Don't be afraid to admit you are too tired to do some things. You cannot (and should not) be super woman during the holidays! Just say "no".
- Sleep, sleep, sleep! Try to get about eight hours of sleep each night.
- Have that morning cup of coffee or tea. Studies have shown that limited amounts of caffeine, 200-300 mg a day, have not been associated with any known increased risks for baby.

Survival Q #3: How can I avoid drinking alcohol?

- Don't be tempted to drink alcohol, as alcohol is known to be harmful for baby. Bring your own non-alcoholic beer or wine with you to the party.
- Want something bubbly to drink on New Year's Eve? Try a delicious non-alcoholic sparkling juice or cider.
- Make sure there is no alcohol in the drinks or desserts that your host/hostess is serving at the party. Don't be afraid to ask questions!

Survival Q #4: How can I avoid complications from overeating, such as gas and constipation?

- Eat more often, but eat smaller portions. With a baby on board, you do not have as much room in your tummy as you used to!
- When needed for gas, it is okay to take over-the-counter products such as Gas-X®.
- To avoid constipation, drink lots of fluids and eat foods high in fiber, such as apples and broccoli. If constipation continues to be a problem, use commercial stool softeners as needed.

Survival Q #5: If I become sick, which over-the-counter cold and flu medicines can I take?

- Look for products that contain acetaminophen, while avoiding products that contain ibuprofen or aspirin.
- If you have high blood pressure, try to avoid using products that contain pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine, which can slightly narrow the blood vessels and increase blood pressure. Consistent use of decongestants is not recommended during pregnancy for anyone.
- You can use over-the-counter cough medications such as Mucinex® and Robitussin®, without any known increased pregnancy risks.
- And you know what they say about an ounce of prevention…! Get a flu shot!
    - In the United States the flu shot has been given to pregnant women since the 1960s. Studies of thousands of women who have received the flu shot just before or during pregnancy have found no increased risk for birth defects or other problems.
    - The flu vaccine given by injection is recommended for all women planning to become pregnant or who already are pregnant (whether in their first, second, or third trimester) during the flu season.

If you have any questions, don't forget that you can call, email, or live chat with a MotherToBaby expert. And to make it even less stressful for you, you can now just send us a text with your question! We're trying to make it as easy as possible for you, Mom – you have enough to worry about! **Just text us at 855-999-3525.** We are here to help. Happy holidays and may you have a zen-like season!



Neely Cessac is a Teratogen Information Counselor at the North Texas affiliate of MotherToBaby. She has been with the service for over two years and loves working with pregnant moms!

MotherToBaby is a service of the international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS),

a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about alcohol, medications, vaccines, diseases, or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby's new text counseling service by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit MotherToBaby.org to browse a library of fact sheets.

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