To Boost or Not to Boost, That is the Question

Morgan called late Friday afternoon with a question about COVID-19 booster shots. She shared that she was 37 weeks along and had received both shots of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine back in February, at the very beginning of her pregnancy. Morgan wanted to do what was best to protect her baby, and asked if she qualified for the booster shot that was now available.

As a Teratogen Information Specialist at MotherToBaby California, COVID-19 vaccine questions are my number one inquiry right now. With the guidance continuing to evolve as the pandemic rages on, it can be hard for pregnant women to keep up! Luckily, that's what we are here to help with. I shared with Morgan that although the vaccines are still working well to prevent severe illness, hospitalization, and death, overall effectiveness has been shown to decrease over time (called waning immunity). Because of this decreased protection, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have recommended booster shots for some people over the age of 18, including:

- Certain groups – including those who are pregnant or recently pregnant – who got both doses of an mRNA vaccine (Pfizer or Moderna) at least 6 months ago, and
- Everyone who got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at least 2 months ago.

So, what does this mean for my pregnant caller Morgan? Women who are pregnant and recently pregnant (up to 42 days after delivery) may be more likely to get severely ill from COVID-19. We know that there are higher risks of ICU admission, need for a ventilator, and death when a woman gets COVID-19 while pregnant, so protection of this group through vaccination is extremely important. I shared with Morgan that since it has been more than 6 months since she received her first two doses of the Pfizer vaccine, and since she is currently pregnant, she may choose to get a booster shot. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the Society for Maternal Fetal Medicine (SMFM) have both recommended the booster at any time in pregnancy once you're eligible for it.

Morgan and I went on to review the latest pregnancy data on the COVID-19 vaccines, which now includes thousands of women who have received mRNA vaccines (Pfizer or Moderna). Reassuringly, the available data does not suggest a risk for pregnancy complications (including miscarriage, preterm birth, stillbirth, effects on the baby's growth, or infant death). Although COVID-19 booster shots have not been specifically studied in pregnancy, the Pfizer and J&J boosters are the same dose and contain the same ingredients as the initial doses, and the Moderna booster contains just half of the original dose. Most experts agree that the components of the COVID vaccines only stay in our bodies for a short time, and are not expected to cross the placenta to reach the baby.

Morgan was happy to hear that she qualified for the booster shot. Her three-year-old was in preschool, and although he wore his mask every day, she was still worried about him bringing home COVID and infecting her. She also visited her grandparents often, and wanted to keep them safe. For her, the benefits of protecting herself and her unborn baby definitely outweighed any potential risks.

Before we disconnected, Morgan asked about her sister-in-law who received the Moderna vaccine three months ago and was now pregnant. “Would she be able to get a booster?” Looking at the latest CDC guidelines, I informed Morgan that her sister-in-law would need to wait until 6 months after her second dose of Moderna before she became eligible for the booster. However, I also reminded her that her sister-in-law still has good protection against becoming very sick or hospitalized from COVID-19 from her initial vaccination. Like everyone who is pregnant, she should continue to take other precautions, such as wearing a mask and avoiding crowded indoor gatherings.

If you are unsure whether or not you qualify for a booster or you have other vaccine-related questions, please reach out to a MotherToBaby Specialist. And for anyone who has not yet received their initial COVID-19 vaccine, please know that it is strongly recommended before or during pregnancy by many organizations focused on maternal and child health, including the CDC, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine. If you would like to go over the latest pregnancy information for the COVID-19 vaccines, COVID-19 boosters, or any other exposures, please give us a call.

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

Disclaimer: MotherToBaby Fact Sheets are meant for general information purposes and should not replace the advice of your health care provider. MotherToBaby is a service of the non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS). Copyright by OTIS, October 1, 2021.