The Return of Measles

Lately, it seems like every few months a new infectious disease makes the headlines. The COVID-19 pandemic dominated the news cycle for some time, but as more and more people get vaccinated and the number of severe cases starts to decrease, the media's focus has shifted to other known or emerging threats. From the flu and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), to mpox and syphilis, infections seem to be spreading like wildfire. Most recently, measles has made yet another comeback, prompting many women who are planning pregnancy, currently pregnant, or breastfeeding to make sure they are taking steps to avoid infection.

When I logged into our live chat service at www.mothertobaby.org on Tuesday morning, a chat from Alyssa popped up right away. "I'm currently 18 weeks pregnant and there was a measles case reported at my son's preschool. Do I need to be worried?"

It's understandable that Alyssa would be concerned. Measles (also known as rubeola) is a highly contagious respiratory disease caused by a virus. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) the measles virus can live for up to two hours in an airspace where the infected person coughed or sneezed. If people breathe the contaminated air or touch the infected surface, then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth, they can become infected. Measles is so contagious that if one person has it, up to 90% of the people close to that person who are not immune will also become infected.

Symptoms of measles generally appear about 7-14 days after a person is infected, and can include high fever, dry cough, runny nose, red watery eyes, and a rash all over the body. To date, studies have not identified an increased risk for birth defects when pregnant women get infected with measles during pregnancy. However, research suggests that a measles infection can be associated with an increased risk for miscarriage, premature delivery (having the baby before 37 weeks), and stillbirth.

The first question I asked Alyssa on chat was if she had ever received the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine. Just one dose is about 93% effective at preventing measles, while two doses is close to 97% effective, so it's the best way to prevent this disease. These vaccines are routinely given in childhood, so Alyssa couldn't remember if she had received both, but after texting her mom she was able to confirm that she was fully vaccinated. Whew, that was good news. Next we discussed the date of exposure. I asked Alyssa when the positive case was reported at daycare, to which she answered that it was about two weeks ago. More good news. Since neither Alyssa nor her son had experienced any symptoms yet, infection was unlikely.

Since measles doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon, knowing how to best protect yourself against the illness at all reproductive life stages is important.

Pre-Conception: Women who are planning a pregnancy in the future should make sure they are up to date with their MMR vaccines **BEFORE** they get pregnant. If you can't find your vaccine record, call your healthcare provider who may know. If they don't have a record, a blood test (titer) can be done to determine if you have immunity to measles. If it turns out you are not immune, you'll want to get two doses of MMR vaccine for optimal protection. Just make sure you wait at least one month after getting the last shot before attempting to get pregnant.

Pregnancy: Since pregnant women shouldn't receive live vaccines (like MMR), the best thing you can focus on during pregnancy is prevention. Good hand washing is always a good idea. If there is a confirmed measles outbreak near you, consider avoiding crowded public places and steer clear of any locations that have been identified as a known risk.

Breastfeeding: Once you are no longer pregnant, the MMR vaccine can be administered. The CDC considers the MMR vaccine compatible with breastfeeding and side effects for the breastfed baby are not expected.

If you have any questions about measles infection or the MMR vaccine while planning a pregnancy, during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, MotherToBaby is here to help. Give us a call at 866-626-6847, text, or chat with one of our information specialists today.

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

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