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!

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, December 2, 2021.