Coronaviruses

What are coronaviruses? How do people get them?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a family of viruses that cause respiratory illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). In late 2019, a novel (new) coronavirus called COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan, China. It has since spread to other countries, including the United States.

The most common symptoms of MERS, SARS and COVID-19 include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and diarrhea, although some people have only mild or no symptoms. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, respiratory failure, kidney failure, and death.

Coronaviruses are easily spread by close person-to-person contact. When an infected person sneezes or coughs, the virus can spread to others who are nearby. The best ways to prevent getting a coronavirus are to avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing or sneezing, avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth, clean/disinfect frequently touched surfaces, and wash your hands frequently. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend avoiding travel to areas with coronavirus outbreaks. You can find the CDC travel health notices here.

Can I be tested for coronavirus?

CDC offers testing guidance for COVID-19 here. If you have symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath), contact your health care provider right away.

Can being infected with a coronavirus make it harder for me to get pregnant?

Studies have not been done to see if having a coronavirus could make it harder to get pregnant.

Does being infected with a coronavirus during pregnancy increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Studies have not been done to see if getting a coronavirus during pregnancy could increase the chance of miscarriage. In reports of pregnant women who had SARS in the first trimester, 4 out of 8 pregnancies ended in miscarriage. There is not enough information to know if the miscarriages were caused by the virus, the severity of the mother’s illness, or other reasons. More research is needed to know how coronavirus infection could affect a pregnancy.

Does being infected with a coronavirus in the first trimester increase the chance of birth defects?

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. There are no published studies on coronavirus infection in pregnancy and birth defects.

A high fever in the first trimester can increase the chance of certain birth defects (see MotherToBaby’s fact sheet: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/hyperthermia-pregnancy/). If you get sick with a coronavirus or any other illness and develop a high fever, please speak with your healthcare provider as soon as possible to discuss the best way to lower it.
Does having a coronavirus in the second or third trimester cause other pregnancy complications?

The possibility of pregnancy problems for women who have mild coronavirus illness is unknown. However, pregnant women may be at higher risk of complications and death from coronavirus infections, so prompt treatment of the symptoms is important. If the virus is left untreated, complications in the mother such as pneumonia and kidney failure could cause problems for the baby. Even with treatment, pregnant women with severe illness from a coronavirus might need to deliver their babies prematurely (before 37 weeks). Preterm delivery can be associated with long-term health problems for babies.

In reports of 10 pregnant women with SARS infection in the second or third trimester, 4 required preterm delivery by C-section because of their severe illness. Two other pregnancies went on to develop complications including poor growth of the babies. It is not clear if these complications were due to the mothers’ infections or some other reason. No SARS infections were reported in the infants.

Among 11 pregnant women with MERS infection in the second or third trimester, 3 required preterm delivery by C-section because of severe illness. One very premature infant died shortly afterwards. Two other women had stillbirths. No MERS infections were reported in the infants.

In recent reports of 19 women diagnosed with COVID-19 during the third trimester of pregnancy, 11 required preterm delivery by C-section (most because of the mothers’ illness). Two other babies were also born prematurely. Some of the babies had breathing problems and other symptoms that can be caused by prematurity, and one premature infant died. Most of the infants were tested for COVID-19 infection after delivery, and all the tests were negative.

More information is needed in order to know all the possible effects of coronavirus infection in pregnancy.

Does exposure to a coronavirus in pregnancy cause long-term problems in behavior or learning for the baby?

Studies have not been done to see if having a coronavirus in pregnancy could have long-term effects on the child.

Can I breastfeed if I have the coronavirus?

Seven women diagnosed with COVID-19 in late pregnancy provided samples of their first breast milk. All 7 milk samples tested negative for the virus. However, more information is needed to know the effects of coronavirus on breast milk. Women who are breastfeeding should talk with their healthcare providers and weigh the known benefits of breastfeeding against the unknown risks of breastfeeding with coronavirus. If you choose to breastfeed while you have a coronavirus, taking precautions such as frequent hand washing and wearing a facemask can limit the chance of passing the virus to the baby.

If a man has a coronavirus, could it affect his fertility (ability to get partner pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects?

This has not been well studied. In general, exposures that fathers have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/pdf/.

Please click here to view references.

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