I'm pregnant or breastfeeding. Should I get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Getting the COVID vaccine as soon as possible is the safest choice for most people, including people who are in any trimester of pregnancy or are breastfeeding. The information below will help you make an informed choice about when to get the COVID vaccine while you are pregnant, trying to get pregnant or breastfeeding.

WHY SHOULD I GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

1. **COVID-19 can be dangerous and may be more dangerous in pregnant people.**
   - COVID-19 patients who are pregnant are 4-5 times more likely to end up in the intensive care unit (ICU) or on a ventilator than COVID-19 patients of similar age who are not pregnant [2,3]
   - Preterm birth may be more common for pregnant people with severe COVID-19, but other obstetric complications such as stillbirth do not appear to be increased.[4]
   - Though the risk is low, pregnant people are more likely to die of COVID-19, than non-pregnant people with COVID-19 who are the same age.[5,6]

2. **The COVID-19 mRNA vaccine series provides excellent protection against COVID-19.**
   - If COVID-19 infections go up in our communities, your risk of getting COVID-19 will go up too.
   - Getting the vaccine will prevent you from getting COVID-19 and may keep you from giving COVID-19 to the people around you.

3. **The COVID-19 vaccine cannot give you COVID-19.**
   - The COVID-19 vaccine has no live virus.[7]
   - The COVID-19 vaccine does NOT contain ingredients that are known to be harmful to pregnant people or the fetus.
   - Many vaccines are routinely given in pregnancy and are safe (for example: tetanus, whooping cough, and flu).

4. Although pregnant and breastfeeding people were not included in the trials testing COVID-19 vaccines, many pregnant people have received Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines during the pandemic. It has been shown that they develop immunity in the same way as non-pregnant people and their babies may receive some immunity after birth. There have not been any concerns raised about negative health effects from vaccine for pregnant people or their babies at this time.[8,9]

More details about how the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines work can be found on page 4.

WHAT SHOULD I THINK ABOUT TO HELP ME DECIDE?

Make sure you understand as much as you can about COVID-19 and about the vaccine.
Ask a trusted source, like your healthcare provider.

Think about your own personal risk of getting COVID-19 and the risk of COVID-19 where you live.

Risks of being exposed to COVID-19 are higher if…

- You have contact with people outside your household who do not wear masks
- You are a healthcare worker in close contact with patients who are known or suspected to have COVID-19
- You are an essential worker in close contact with people who may not know they have COVID-19

Risks of getting sick from COVID-19 and admitted to hospital are higher if…

- You are overweight
- You have other medical problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease
- You smoke
- You are in a racial or ethnic minority group

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

1. COVID-19 vaccines were not tested in pregnant or breastfeeding people in clinical trials.

- Although pregnant or breastfeeding people were not included in the vaccine trials, the experience with vaccination during the pandemic is increasing and has been reassuring.
  - For example, US data on nearly 4,000 pregnant people who received either the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine or the Moderna vaccine reported no differences in the rates of adverse pregnancy or newborn outcomes compared to pre-pandemic rates.[10]
  - According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Congress of Obstetricians & Gynecologists (ACOG), no major safety concerns have been identified.
- There is emerging data that pregnant people develop immunity from the COVID-19 vaccines in the same way as non-pregnant people.
- Studies are ongoing about whether there are unique downsides in pregnancy, like different side effects or an increased risk of miscarriage or fetal abnormalities. However, there have been no concerns identified to date.
- Small studies have indicated that COVID-19 vaccination in pregnancy provides protection for babies after they are born.[8,9]

2. People getting the vaccine will probably have some side effects.

- Although serious side effects such as anaphylaxis are very rare, many people had some side effects.
  The side effects of the vaccine were:
  - Injection site reactions like sore arm (84-92%)
  - Fatigue (62-70%)
  - Headache (55-65%)
  - muscle pain (38-61%)
  - chills (32-45%)
  - joint pain (24-45%)
  - fever (14-17%)
- About 1-2% of people will get a high fever (over 39°C or 102°F). **A persistent high fever** (one that does not respond to Tylenol) during the first trimester of pregnancy might increase the risk of congenital defects or miscarriage.
- Tylenol (acetaminophen) can be used during pregnancy if you have a high fever.

WHAT DO EXPERTS RECOMMEND?

COVID-19 is dangerous and can spread very easily. Because of this, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) *"recommends that…COVID-19 vaccine should be offered to people [16-18 years of age or older with Pfizer-BioNTech down to age 12] without contraindications to the vaccine."* (NACI)[11]

NACI preferentially recommends that a complete vaccine series with an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine should be offered to people in the authorized age group who are pregnant. Informed consent should include discussion about emerging evidence on the safety of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines in this population.[11]

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) recommends offering vaccination at any time during pregnancy or while breastfeeding if no contraindications exist. This recommendation reflects Canadian information about increased risk for hospitalization and ICU admission for pregnant people who become ill with COVID-19, compared with people who are not pregnant.[12]

WHAT ELSE ABOUT BREASTFEEDING?

Mothers should not stop breastfeeding after vaccination. Continuing to breastfeed is important to protect an unvaccinated baby against respiratory and gastrointestinal infections as well as other illnesses. Emerging research shows that people who are breastfeeding have antibodies in their milk after being vaccinated with COVID-19 mRNA vaccine.[8,13]

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I'M TRYING TO GET PREGNANT?

It is recommended that you complete the entire COVID-19 vaccination series (where possible) to achieve maximum vaccine efficacy before pregnancy. Those who are trying to become pregnant do not need to avoid pregnancy after vaccination with an mRNA vaccine. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada recommends a risk-benefit discussion with a care provider.

SUMMARY

1. COVID-19 seems to cause more harm in pregnant people than in people of the same age who are not pregnant.
2. There have been no safety concerns about COVID-19 vaccination in pregnancy to date. We do know that a small number of people get fever from the vaccine and a persistent high fever (one that does not respond to Tylenol) in the first trimester of pregnancy (first 3 months) may cause problems for the developing fetus.
3. Getting the COVID vaccine as soon as possible is the safest choice for most people who are pregnant or breastfeeding.
4. Whether to get the vaccine during pregnancy or while breastfeeding is your choice.

DO YOU HAVE
MORE QUESTIONS?

Call your healthcare provider to talk about your own personal decision.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE COVID-19 VACCINE

How does the COVID-19 vaccine protect against COVID-19?

The vaccine causes our body to produce protection (such as antibodies) to help us keep from becoming sick if we are exposed to the COVID-19 virus. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines use a new method called messenger RNA (mRNA) to help our body protect itself against the virus.

In a large study where people were given two doses of the vaccine, the vaccine was shown to work very well at preventing people from becoming sick with COVID-19. The group of people who got the vaccine were much less likely to become sick with COVID-19 in the weeks after getting the vaccine compared with the group that did not get the vaccine. It is very important to get both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to be optimally protected.

You cannot get COVID-19 infection from the vaccine.

Intended Use: This decision aid is intended for use by pregnant and breastfeeding people (and people planning on becoming pregnant) who are considering getting the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as their healthcare providers, and their friends and family. *Adapted by K. Top, S. McNeil, N. MacDonald, H. Scott and the members of the Nova Scotia Vaccine Expert Panel and the Reproductive Care Program of Nova Scotia.* ***Updated June 4, 2021.***

This decision aid was adapted from a tool developed by the Shared Decision-Making: COVID Vaccination in Pregnancy working group at the University of Massachusetts Medical School – Baystate and can be reproduced and distributed without additional permission.

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