

Audience: Pregnant Women & Parents of Young Children

CDC 2011-2012 Flu Season

Word Count: 709

Pregnant Women and Infants – Targets for the Flu

Pregnant women and young children have been considered at “high risk of flu-related complications” for years. The risk from the flu is greater for pregnant women because pregnancy can reduce the ability of the lungs and the immune system to work normally. This can be bad for both mother and baby. Pregnant women with the flu have a greater chance for serious problems for their unborn baby, including premature labor and delivery.

Young children, whose immune systems are still developing, are also at high risk for flu-related complications. Each year about 100 flu-related deaths in children are thought to occur in the U.S. For the 2010-11 influenza season, 116 influenza-associated pediatric deaths were reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The risk of serious flu complications requiring hospitalization is highest among children younger than 6 months of age.

Babies younger than 6 months of age are also too young to be vaccinated against the flu. But by a mother getting a flu shot during pregnancy, she not only protects herself but also protects her baby for up to 6 months after birth. Another way to protect the baby is for all caregivers and close contacts—including fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents and babysitters—to be vaccinated against the flu. This concept is known as “cocooning.”

While CDC is encouraging everyone six months and older to get vaccinated against the flu this and every flu season, there is a special message for pregnant women and parents: “Don’t pass up this easy way to protect yourself and your children against the flu,” says Dr. Anne Schuchat, Assistant Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service and CDC Director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases. It’s important to remember that children 6 months through 8 years of age will need two doses of flu vaccine—a second dose, timed 4 weeks after the first—in order to be fully protected against the flu, if they didn’t receive at least one dose of the 2010-2011 season vaccine.

“Getting a flu vaccine during pregnancy can reduce the risk of getting the flu while pregnant and after,” says Dr. Schuchat. “And babies younger than six months can get very sick from flu, but are too young to get vaccinated. The best way to protect them is to have their caregivers and close contacts vaccinated.” Yet another way to protect them is for their mother to get the flu shot when she is pregnant.

Seasonal flu shots have been given safely to millions of pregnant women and children over many years. Though there is no proof that thimerosal (a preservative) is harmful to a pregnant woman, their babies, or young children, some worry about it. So, as before, vaccine companies are making plenty of preservative-free flu vaccine as an option for pregnant women and children. The flu shot (not the nasal

spray) is safe for pregnant women during any trimester and is also the form recommended for infants 6 months to 2 years of age. Nursing mothers and children 2 years of age and older can receive a flu shot or the nasal spray.

Usually worse than the common cold, the flu can cause fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and weakness. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. Pregnant women and parents of children younger than two years of age should call their doctor or nurse right away if they, or their children, become sick. Your doctor or pediatrician may prescribe medicines (antiviral drugs) that can reduce the severity of flu illness and shorten the length of time that you are sick.

Vaccination continues to be the best protection against the flu. Get yourself—and all of your children 6 months of age and older—vaccinated against the flu to help keep all family members healthy this flu season. Don't forget the second dose for the children younger than 9 who did not receive at least one dose of the vaccine last season! A flu vaccine provides protection that lasts throughout the season, even if you get vaccinated early in the season.

For more information, talk to your doctor or contact CDC at 1-800-CDC-INFO or <http://www.cdc.gov/flu>.

###