

Seasonal influenza vaccination for pregnant women

As with any medication, very rarely a severe allergic reaction can occur. Most severe reactions will occur within 15 minutes of receiving a vaccine. It is important to wait for 15 minutes after receiving a vaccine as the doctor or nurse is trained to recognise and manage any immediate severe reactions.

Has the vaccine been properly tested for safety?

Yes. Before a vaccine, or any medication can be used in Australia it must be licensed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA use clinical trials to extensively test each vaccine for safety and effectiveness.

What about the preservative thiomersal?

The seasonal flu vaccine provided free for pregnant women does not contain thiomersal.

What if I have had the H1N1 vaccine already?

It is safe for pregnant women to have the seasonal flu vaccine if they have already been vaccinated with the H1N1 vaccine.

The seasonal flu vaccine does contain the H1N1 strain and it also provides protection against two other strains recommended by the World Health Organisation and the Australian Influenza Vaccine Committee.

What about Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) and the influenza vaccine?

Guillain-Barré syndrome is a rare, and sometimes fatal condition, which affects the body's nerves. The exact cause is not clear, but it generally occurs after common gastro infections, coughs and colds. It is thought to be the immune system attacking the body's own nerves. This results in muscle weakness and sometimes paralysis, which can last for weeks to months. Most people do recover completely, but the consequences can be severe in others.

In the USA in 1976 there was an association of GBS after an influenza vaccine. Studies conducted since 1976 have not found a higher risk of GBS associated with influenza vaccines.

¹WHO Influenza vaccination of women during pregnancy [accessed 12.02.10] available at http://www.who.int/vaccine_safety/topics/influenza/pregnancy/en/index.html

²Health Emergency Pregnancy and Influenza Fact Sheet, Australian Government of Health and Ageing [accessed 12.02.10] available at: <http://www.healthemergency.gov.au/internet/healthemergency/publishing.nsf/Content/pregnancy-and-flu>

³Tamma P, Ault K, del Rio C, Steinhoff M, Halsey N, Omer S (2009) Safety of influenza vaccination during pregnancy. American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology. pp 547-552.



For more information

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Non-English speaking: for information in languages other than English, call the Interpreting and Translating Centre and ask them to call the Department of Health. This service is available at no cost to you, contact (08) 8226 1990.

Based on research from previous influenza pandemic events and from some intense influenza seasons, pregnant women are considered at greater risk of contracting influenza¹.

Pregnant women are strongly encouraged to protect themselves and their baby by getting the seasonal influenza vaccine.

As of 2010 pregnant women (in any trimester) are eligible to receive free seasonal influenza vaccine.

Vaccination provides the best protection against influenza to both pregnant women and their unborn child. Vaccination during pregnancy can provide protective antibodies to the baby for the first few months after birth. This is important, as infants less than 6 months of age are too young to be vaccinated.

What is influenza?

Influenza, commonly known as the flu, is caused by a highly contagious virus spread by coughing and sneezing, or by direct contact with discharges from the throat or nose. Every year it causes illness in the community.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually occur one to three days after infection and may include sudden onset of:

- > Fever
- > Headache
- > Chills
- > Muscle aches
- > Cough
- > Severe tiredness
- > Sore throat
- > Loss of appetite

Complications from influenza infection can include pneumonia, worsening of other existing illnesses or death.

What are the risks of influenza infection if I'm pregnant?

Pregnancy increases the risk of developing serious complications from influenza. Complications of influenza infection in pregnant women are the same for the rest of the population but can also include miscarriage or premature labour.

Pregnant women have an increased risk of complications because their immune system is naturally suppressed during pregnancy and their "expanded size" can make breathing more difficult. This is particularly relevant to women in their second and third trimester².

Generally pregnant women have greater risk of requiring medical visits and hospital stays due to influenza-related illness compared to non-pregnant women.

The best way to avoid getting influenza is to get vaccinated each year in autumn before the influenza season starts.

The influenza vaccine is free* and strongly recommended for:

- > All pregnant women
- > Everyone aged 65 years and older
- > Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and older
- > Everyone from six months of age with a medical condition that increases the risk of influenza complications such as
 - heart disease
 - chronic lung and kidney disease
 - neuromuscular disorders
 - diabetes, low immunity and other chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow up or hospital stays

* Your doctor may charge a consultation fee.

I had the influenza vaccine last year, do I need to be vaccinated again this year?

Yes. Influenza viruses change frequently so the influenza vaccine is reviewed and updated each year. Protection against influenza develops about two weeks after receiving the vaccine and provides protection for a year.

There are different brand names of influenza vaccine but they all protect against the same strains of influenza virus. The influenza vaccine is highly effective in reducing the risk of death and/or hospitalisation from complications resulting from influenza.

Is the vaccine safe if I'm pregnant?

Yes. The vaccine is safe to give in all stages of pregnancy. The possible side effects of the influenza vaccine are the same as for the rest of the population.

The seasonal flu vaccine has been given safely to millions of women across the world. Studies looking at the effects of pregnant women receiving the seasonal flu vaccination indicate no negative effects on pregnant women or their babies³.

Influenza vaccine cannot give you or your unborn baby influenza because it contains no active virus. Some people who receive the vaccine but still develop influenza have generally been infected before the vaccine has had time to take effect. After vaccination some people may still get the flu but they will experience a milder case than those who were not vaccinated.

What are the possible side effects of the influenza vaccine?

Like all individuals who receive a vaccine, expectant mothers may experience the following side effects:

- > Pain, redness and swelling at the injection site
- > Low grade temperature
- > Muscle aches
- > Drowsiness or tiredness
- > A temporary small lump at the injection site

If mild reactions do occur, they may last one to two days. If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or hospital.