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Seasonal Influenza (the Flu) during Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to seasonal influenza can have during pregnancy. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the respiratory (breathing) tract. It is often called the flu. The symptoms of influenza are fever, headache, chills, muscle aches, coughing, congestion, runny nose, and sore throat. Influenza sometimes causes vomiting and diarrhea.

The typical flu season is from November through March of each year. The types (strains) of viruses that cause seasonal influenza change a little bit each year. Starting during the 2009-2010 flu season, people got sick from both seasonal influenza viruses and a new type of virus called H1N1. For more information about the 2009 H1N1 flu and pregnancy, see the OTIS fact sheet [H1N1 Flu and Pregnancy](#).

Is influenza contagious? How does the virus spread?

Yes, influenza is contagious. The virus is spread through contact with respiratory droplets from the nose and mouth of infected individuals. When people cough or sneeze droplets containing the virus are spread through the air. The incubation period (the time between exposure and the development of symptoms) is about 1 to 4 days. A person with the flu is contagious for up to a week after he or she first develops symptoms.

Can having influenza during pregnancy put my health at risk?

Yes. When you are pregnant your body has a harder time fighting infections. Pregnant women have an increased risk of developing

serious complications from the flu, such as respiratory distress (severe breathing problems).

Can having influenza during pregnancy cause birth defects or put my baby at risk?

The influenza virus itself has not been shown to cause birth defects. However, having a high fever during pregnancy may increase the risk for birth defects. Therefore, fever during pregnancy should be treated. Acetaminophen is the drug of choice for reducing fever during pregnancy. Tylenol[®] is one brand of acetaminophen.

Being very sick from the flu may increase the risk of pregnancy complications such as miscarriage or premature delivery. It is important to talk with your doctor if you are pregnant and have symptoms of the flu.

How can I protect myself and my baby?

The most important thing you can do for yourself and your baby is to get the injected seasonal influenza vaccine, also known as the flu shot. Because pregnant women are at an increased risk for complications from influenza, women who are pregnant (whether in their first, second, or third trimester) or planning to become pregnant should get the seasonal flu shot.

A nasal-spray influenza vaccine (FluMist[®]) is also available. This vaccine contains a live but weakened virus. The nasal-spray influenza vaccine is not recommended during pregnancy.

For more information about the flu vaccines during pregnancy, see the OTIS fact

sheet [Seasonal Influenza Vaccine \(Flu Shot\) during Pregnancy](#).

In addition to getting the flu shot, be sure that you and others around you are doing the following to help prevent spread of the flu:

- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people
- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze
- Stay home and avoid close contact with others if you are sick

What should I do if I get sick?

If you have flu-like symptoms, talk to your doctor right away. Your doctor may recommend antiviral medications to lessen the symptoms of the flu and to reduce the risk of serious illness. These medications work best if taken early in the course of the illness. For more information about antiviral medications, see the OTIS fact sheet [Antiviral Medications to Treat/Prevent Influenza during Pregnancy](#).

If you are sick, stay home and avoid close contact with others to prevent passing the illness to other people. Be sure to drink plenty of fluids. Treat fever right away with acetaminophen (Tylenol®).

Should I talk to my doctor if one of my family members is sick?

Yes. Talk with your doctor if you have been in close contact with someone who has the flu. Pregnant women are at an increased risk for complications from the flu. Some women may benefit from taking antiviral medications to prevent getting the flu after they have been exposed. Your health care provider can help you decide whether taking an antiviral medication for flu prevention is best for you.

Should I stop breastfeeding if I have the flu?

No. Breastfeeding provides the best nutrition for your baby, and there are antibodies in your breast milk that may help prevent your baby from getting sick.

It is important to try to protect your baby from getting sick. Wash your hands with soap and water before holding your baby. Avoid coughing or sneezing on your baby. Consider wearing a mask over your nose and mouth while feeding and caring for your baby to help prevent you passing the illness to your baby. While you are ill, you may want to consider having a family member who is not sick help you with caring for your baby.

If your baby has the flu, it is especially important to breastfeed as often as possible. Your baby will need extra fluids during this time. Your milk is better for this than anything else, even than things like Pedialyte®. Also, antibodies in your milk help your baby fight the infection and get better faster.

OTIS is currently conducting the [OTIS Vaccines and Medications in Pregnancy Study \(VAMPSS\)](#). The purpose of the study is to learn more about influenza vaccines and antiviral medication use in pregnancy. If you are pregnant and have received the influenza vaccine or taken an antiviral medication to prevent or treat the flu (including Tamiflu® or Relenza®), and you are interested in learning more about this study, please contact the OTIS VAMPSS Coordinating Center at 877-311-8972.

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Selected References:

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*If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call **OTIS at 1-866-626-6847**.*