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Influenza and the Vaccine During Pregnancy

This information will help you determine if your prenatal exposure to the influenza vaccine represents an increased fetal risk. With every pregnancy, all women have a 3 to 5 percent chance to have a baby with a birth defect.

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the respiratory tract. It is commonly known as the flu and is caused by a variety of viruses. Major symptoms are fever, headache, chills, muscle aches, coughing, congestion, runny nose, and sore throat. Nausea is not seen very often with influenza.

Is influenza contagious? How does the virus spread?

Yes, influenza is contagious. The virus is spread through contact with secretions of the nose and mouth of infected persons. The incubation period (the time between infection and the development of symptoms) is between 1 to 3 days.

Can having influenza during pregnancy be harmful to the mother or the baby?

Influenza may cause an increase in the rate of miscarriage during pregnancy. Some women who develop influenza while pregnant are at an increased risk for heart and lung conditions that may lead to their hospitalization. The high incidence of fever during influenza is also a concern for pregnant women. If you have a high fever (over 102 degrees for more than 24 hours) at any time between the beginning of the third week and the end of the fourth week after conception, you may want to talk with your doctor about taking medication to reduce the fever. Researchers have seen a small risk for a birth defect called spina bifida when high fevers occur during this time period.

What is the influenza vaccine?

The injected influenza vaccine, also known as the flu vaccine (flu shot), is an inactivated virus vaccine. This means that it is noninfectious and cannot cause influenza. Most influenza vaccines contain virus particles from three different strains of influenza (2 type A and 1 type B). This mixture of viruses is updated every year according to the current type of virus thought to be causing infection. It is necessary to receive the influenza vaccine each year in order to be protected from the current flu virus. This vaccine is given as an injection in the upper arm.

A nasal-spray influenza vaccine (FluMist) has become available. This vaccine is different from the injected vaccine because it is composed of a live but weakened virus. There have been no animal or human studies regarding exposure to this form of the influenza vaccine during pregnancy. Therefore, the safety of receiving the nasal-spray vaccine during pregnancy is unknown and should be avoided.

Is it safe for me to receive the influenza vaccine while I'm pregnant?

The current data does not suggest an increased risk to the fetus from the vaccine made from a virus that is inactivated. Therefore, the injected influenza vaccine is considered safe for use during pregnancy. It is recommended that health-care providers consider giving the influenza vaccine to all women who will be in the second or third

trimester of pregnancy or early postpartum during the influenza season. In addition, pregnant women who have medical conditions that increase their risk for complications from influenza should be vaccinated before the influenza season, regardless of the stage of pregnancy.

If given in the third trimester, the vaccine may provide protection for the baby during its first few months of life because the mother can pass her antibodies to her baby through the placenta.

As previously stated, the new nasal form of influenza vaccine contains a live but weakened virus. Presently the safety of this form of the vaccine during pregnancy is not known and should be avoided.

Is there anyone who should not receive this vaccine?

Yes. Since the virus used for the vaccine is grown in eggs, anyone with an allergy or hypersensitivity to eggs should not receive the influenza vaccine. An immediate allergic reaction after vaccination can occur in someone with this condition. In addition, anyone who has previously had a negative effect from the influenza vaccine should consider not receiving the vaccine again without consulting your doctor.

When should I receive this vaccine?

Protection typically begins 1 to 2 weeks after receiving the vaccination and lasts for 6 months or longer. It should be given once each year, before the flu season begins. In the US, the flu season usually begins in December, so the vaccine should be given between September and mid-November.

Are there any negative side effects I should be aware of?

Side effects from the influenza vaccine are uncommon. One third of those receiving the vaccine report some soreness at the site of the injection, and about 5 to 10% experience headaches, low grade fever

or malaise (general discomfort or feelings of uneasiness).

Can I receive the influenza vaccine while I am breastfeeding my baby?

There is no data currently available on this issue. However, the influenza vaccine is not thought to present a risk to the nursing infant. In fact, the vaccine is recommended for most women who are considering breast-feeding.

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