

PREGNANCY AND THE FLU (INFLUENZA)

BY Alan S. Peterson, MD

Those of you who do not know that this is the beginning of the flu season must be living underground! All those of age 6 months and older should have an annual flu shot. It is also extremely important for those that are pregnant or considering becoming pregnant.

The flu vaccine or immunization does not carry any active virus. Therefore one cannot get the flu from the flu vaccine. It does not prevent you, however, from getting other viruses. Many people say that they have gotten the flu shortly after they get the vaccine. This is incorrect. They got some other virus that was not prevented by the flu vaccine. Unfortunately we give the flu vaccine in the time of the year when these other viruses are also very frequent.

Why do doctors suggest that flu vaccines are more important in pregnancy? Pregnancy puts an extra stress on your heart and lungs. It can also decrease your immune system, i.e. the ability of your body to ward off infection. Flu during pregnancy also increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth and low birth weight.

Overall, stillbirth was 51 percent less likely among vaccinated mothers, as opposed to unvaccinated mothers, with the largest reduction in stillbirths coming just after flu season ended. This was from a large study of mothers.

Kids whose mothers had the flu disease while they were pregnant were slightly more likely to be diagnosed with "infantile autism" before the age of three in a Danish study. Also children born after being exposed to the flu disease during pregnancy may have a nearly four-fold higher risk of later developing bipolar disorder. In contrast, pregnant women who get flu shots are at no greater risk for complications. Studies of several thousand pregnant women in scientific literature have assessed the safety in use of flu vaccine during pregnancy.

Infants are at an increased risk of severe flu symptoms and potentially death secondary to the flu. Unfortunately childhood flu vaccines can't begin until the baby is six months of age. If you have the flu shot during pregnancy, the antibodies that you develop will pass through the placenta to help protect your baby from the flu. Recent studies have shown that babies whose mothers had a flu shot during pregnancy were nearly 50% less likely to be hospitalized with the flu during their first flu season than were babies of unvaccinated mothers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends a flu shot for anyone who's pregnant during the flu season-typically late September through late March. Because the infant cannot get his or her first flu shot until six months of age, it is also highly recommended that all parents, grandparents, and others that might take care of or visit your child are immunized against the flu to help protect the child from contracting the flu from one of his or her friends or loved ones. One of the problems is that the flu can be transmitted 24-48 hours before one ever has an inkling that they are coming down with the flu.

Not to be left out, flu shots are very important for the elderly also. Indeed there is a high dose vaccine for those 65 years of age and over that provides more significant protection than the “regular” vaccine and I am told that it is now covered by Medicare.