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WOMEN'S HEALTHCARE
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Pregnancy and the Flu

This flu season brings increased concerns and risks for pregnant women. Unfortunately, pregnant women are at increased risk for both the seasonal and H1N1 ("Swine Flu") influenza viruses. This is due to the physical and hormonal changes that occur in the bodies of pregnant women. The H1N1 flu virus is particularly dangerous because it is a new virus and therefore there is no level of immunity built up from previous flu illnesses.

Babies and young children are also at a high risk for complications with both strains of flu. Families and caretakers of infants younger than 6 months old are strongly encouraged to become vaccinated as soon as possible with both the seasonal and H1N1 flu vaccines to protect the babies from being exposed. A recent study shows that pregnant mothers who were vaccinated with both seasonal and H1N1 flu vaccines reduced flu illness in their infants under 6 months old by 63%.

Pregnant women should be in close contact with their physician or healthcare practitioner as soon as possible if they develop flu-like symptoms or have been in close contact with someone who is demonstrating flu-like symptoms.

Flu-like symptoms include the following:

- Fever (especially over 101 degrees)
- Cough
- Sore Throat
- Headache
- Body Aches
- Shortness of Breath
- Nasal Congestion
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

Fever is present in 97% of flu cases, and should be taken seriously by pregnant women. Pregnant women should call their physician or healthcare practitioner soon after developing a fever; however, the fever can usually be reduced safely with the use of Acetaminophen (Tylenol).

It is strongly recommended by both the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and multiple health organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) that all pregnant patients receive both the seasonal flu and H1N1 vaccines. In fact, pregnant women are one of the top priority groups to receive the H1N1 vaccines (as they become available around the country).

Pregnant women can receive both vaccines during any stage or trimester of pregnancy, and while they are postpartum (after the baby is born) or during breastfeeding. Concerns about mercury (thimerosal) in vaccines should not prevent pregnant women from obtaining the vaccines. There is no clinical evidence that thimerosal is harmful to either pregnant women or unborn babies, and there are vaccines available that do not contain thimerosal. Pregnant women should not get the seasonal flu and H1N1 vaccines if they have *severe* (life threatening) allergies to eggs, or to any other substance in the virus. However, they should discuss concerns over allergies with their physician or healthcare practitioner to assess the risks.

The seasonal flu vaccine is available now, and the H1N1 vaccine should be available to pregnant women in the upcoming weeks. Pregnant patients should get the flu injections (shots) rather than the nasal spray form of the vaccines for both seasonal and H1N1 viruses, since the nasal spray contains a live form of the viruses. The most common side effects from the H1N1 vaccinations are expected to be mild and similar to those of the seasonal flu vaccines and include soreness, redness, tenderness, or swelling at the injection site. Less common side effects are headache, muscle aches, fever, fatigue, and nausea. Pregnant women should alert their physician or healthcare practitioner immediately if they experience any of the less common side effects after having been vaccinated with either seasonal or H1N1 vaccines.

Other recommended strategies to prevent the flu include:

- Frequent, thorough hand washing (including the use of hand sanitizers) for all members of the family
- Sneezing/coughing into one's elbow (sleeve) or using tissues and immediately disposing of the tissue and washing hands afterwards.
- Avoiding touching eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Avoiding handshaking, large crowds, and people with flu symptoms.
- Staying home and avoiding close contact with other people if you are sick, and making sure family members are also vaccinated.

If you are currently pregnant and/or have a young baby in your family, getting vaccinated for both the seasonal and H1N1 flu viruses is a crucial and imperative step to protect your health and the health of your baby and family members. Both flu vaccines are safe to receive, and will prevent potentially life threatening illness.

To ensure their health, and the health of their family members, all pregnant patients should talk with their physician or healthcare practitioner as soon as possible to develop a care plan to obtain their vaccinations and vaccinations for their immediate family members.