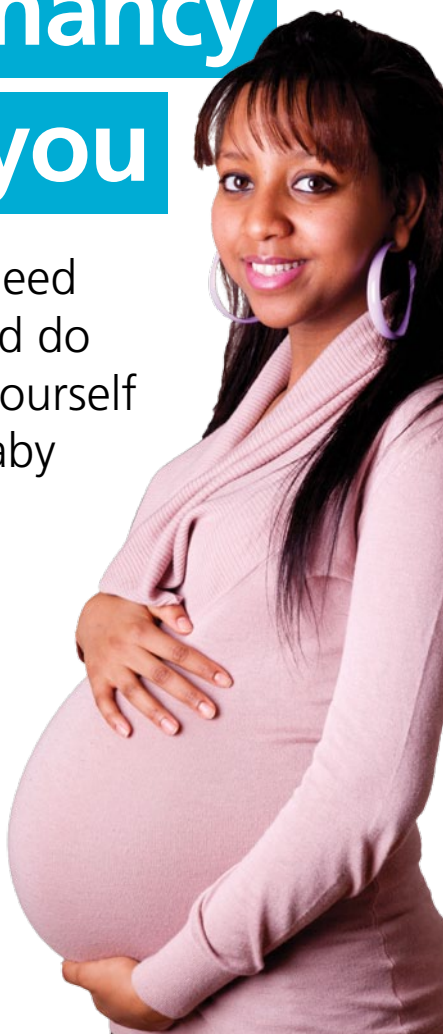


Flu, your pregnancy and you

What you need
to know and do
to protect yourself
and your baby



Pregnant women are at increased risk of getting serious complications from flu, compared with other healthy adults.

This means that if a pregnant woman catches flu, she is much more likely than a woman who isn't pregnant, to be admitted to hospital or on rare occasions be admitted to intensive care and even potentially die.

Flu can also be serious for new born babies, who can catch the infection from their mothers.

This leaflet describes how having the flu vaccination during pregnancy can help protect you and your baby against this infection.

What is flu?

Flu is a highly infectious disease. The symptoms, that come on very quickly, include fever, chills, headaches, aches and pains in the joints and muscles, and extreme tiredness. A bad bout of flu is worse than a heavy cold. You are likely to spend a few days in bed. Serious infections, although less common, can lead to hospitalisation, permanent disability and even death.

What causes flu?

Flu is caused by viruses that are spread from person to person. They infect the respiratory system, where they can lead to pneumonia and other complications. The viruses change every year which is why people have to be vaccinated annually.

How is flu spread?

Flu is spread by coughs and sneezes that propel infected droplets of saliva into the air which are breathed in by others. The disease is also spread by people touching surfaces that the droplets have landed on and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes. This is why frequent hand washing or antiseptic gelling is so important during the winter flu season.

How can I avoid catching flu?

Because people are infectious a day or so before the symptoms start to show (as well as up to seven days after), they won't know if they are spreading the virus or not. So it's very hard to avoid contact with people infected with the flu virus. And, of course, members of your family can always bring it into the home.

You can also wash your hands regularly but this won't stop you catching the disease by breathing in the infected droplets in the air.

So the best way to avoid getting flu is by having the vaccination.

Why does being pregnant make it more serious for me if I get flu?

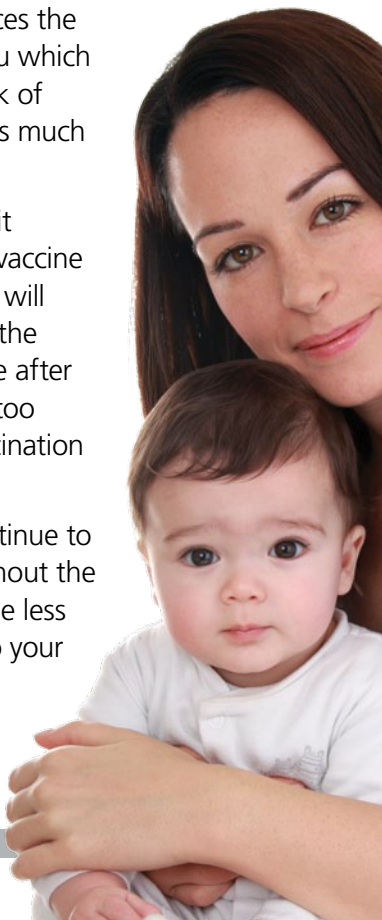
When you are pregnant, your body naturally weakens your immune (defence) system to ensure that the pregnancy is successful. As a result, you are less able to fight off infections compared with when you are not pregnant.

So, if you get flu, you are more likely to be seriously ill with it.

How does my baby benefit if I have the vaccination?

Small babies are also at high risk of being seriously ill if they catch flu, but they cannot be protected themselves by vaccination. Your baby will benefit both directly and indirectly if you have the flu vaccination.

- He or she will benefit because you are less likely to get ill with flu and suffer complications such as pneumonia, particularly in the later stages of your pregnancy.
- Getting flu during pregnancy can lead to an increased risk of miscarriage, premature birth or having a low weight baby. Having the vaccination reduces the chances of getting flu which in turn means the risk of these complications is much reduced.
- Your baby will benefit directly because the vaccine you have been given will also protect them in the first few weeks of life after birth when they are too young to have a vaccination themselves.
- Because you will continue to be protected throughout the flu season, you will be less likely to pass flu onto your new born baby.



But I thought pregnant women weren't supposed to have vaccinations.

Vaccines aren't routinely tested on pregnant women but the flu vaccination has been given safely to millions of women over the last few years and in several countries around the world.

This experience has shown that there are no safety issues relating to the pregnancy or the baby – for example, the number of miscarriages or birth defects in pregnant women who have been vaccinated for flu, tetanus or whooping cough is no different from those who haven't been vaccinated.

When should I have the vaccination?

The flu vaccine needs to be given during the winter season – you can safely have the vaccine at any stage of your pregnancy from conception onwards.

You will need the vaccination every time you are pregnant because the flu viruses will have changed by the time you visit your GP and/or midwife during your next pregnancy.

You will be given the vaccination as an injection in the arm.

Are there any other vaccinations I should have during my pregnancy to protect my unborn baby?

Yes; you should have the whooping cough vaccine but this needs to be given late in pregnancy (between 28 and 32 weeks) to provide the best protection to the new born baby. You can have this vaccination at any time of the year.

How many vaccinations will I need?

You will only need one flu vaccination each pregnancy no matter how many babies you're expecting.



What if I don't have the vaccination and think I might have caught flu?

You should talk to your GP urgently. There is a drug you can take but it has to be taken very soon after the symptoms appear for it to be of any help.

I had flu before getting pregnant – aren't I immune now?

You can't be sure you're immune because there are several flu viruses around at any one time and you won't know which one you have had. The flu vaccine helps protect against the three or four viruses most likely to be circulating, so you should have the vaccination to get the best protection.

I had the flu vaccine last time I was pregnant, do I still need to have it now that I am pregnant again?

Yes; the flu viruses change every year, so the vaccines are changed to match them. Being vaccinated one year won't protect you during the next.

I've heard of some older girls having the vaccination as a nasal spray. Can I have that instead of an injection?

Unfortunately, no, you can't. The nasal spray vaccine is a live vaccine that is used in children and young adults because it is very effective at protecting them against flu. Although there's no evidence of harm caused to pregnant women by having the nasal flu vaccine, the injected flu vaccine is preferred for pregnant women instead, as a precautionary measure.

Who will give me the vaccination?

Your GP or maybe your midwife will offer you the vaccine probably during September or October before the flu season starts later in the winter, but this could be later in the flu season particularly for newly pregnant women

Will I be completely protected by the vaccination?

By having the vaccination you will be significantly reducing your risk of getting flu but no vaccine offers 100% protection. By reducing your risk you will also be reducing the risks to your pregnancy and your baby.

Where can I get more information?

Speak to your GP or midwife or visit the pregnancy and flu pages on the NHS Choices website at: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/Pages/flu-jab-vaccine-pregnant.aspx



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