

COVID-19 Vaccines in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

MotherSafe - Royal Hospital for Women

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Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your health care provider. With every pregnancy there is a 3 to 5% risk of having a baby with a birth defect.

Information on COVID-19 vaccines is rapidly changing. For the most up to date information please call MotherSafe.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a coronavirus (called SARS-CoV-2).¹ This virus is spread by respiratory droplets from our mouths and noses, mostly by close person-to-person contact¹. When an infected person coughs, talks, breathes or sneezes, the virus can easily spread to others who are close by.¹

Issues for pregnancy

There is still limited information about COVID-19 and pregnancy.¹ It is expected that the large majority of pregnant women infected with COVID-19 will experience only mild or moderate symptoms and most of these women are expected to make a full recovery without need for review in hospital.² However studies of COVID-19 infection have shown that pregnant women, especially those in the third trimester, with pre-existing medical problems (such as diabetes, high blood pressure), are overweight or older than 35 years of age, may be at an increased risk of severe illness and hospital admission compared to non-pregnant people.^{1,2,3} Also, pregnant women with COVID-19 may be at an increased risk of other poor outcomes related to pregnancy, such as preterm birth, compared to pregnant women without COVID-19.^{1,2,3}

What are COVID-19 vaccines?

COVID-19 vaccines work by switching on your body's defences against the virus that causes COVID-19.¹ The vaccines currently available in Australia are Comirnaty (Pfizer) and COVID-19 Vaccine Astra-Zeneca.³ These vaccines do not contain live virus that could cause COVID-19.³

Both vaccines require two doses³. For the Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine the doses are given at least 3 weeks apart; and for the Astra-Zeneca vaccine the doses are given 12 weeks apart.³

Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine is the preferred vaccine for women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning a pregnancy³. This is because research has shown that Comirnaty (Pfizer) is safe for pregnant and breastfeeding women and the Astra-Zeneca vaccine has been associated with rare cases of a blood clotting condition, which appears to be more common in people under 60 years of age³.

If you have just the one dose of vaccine this will only give you limited protection against COVID-19 so it is important that you have both doses.^{1,3}

COVID-19 vaccines help to protect people who are vaccinated from getting sick or severely ill with COVID-19.¹ However, it is still not known how long the vaccines will protect people from the virus or if they will stop a person from spreading the virus if they have it.¹ So it is important to continue to help protect yourself from infection by wearing a face covering, avoiding close contact with those that are sick, avoiding crowds and washing hands often.¹

Planning a pregnancy

Comirnaty (Pfizer) is recommended for women who are planning pregnancy and does not affect fertility.^{3,4} If you are trying to become pregnant, you do not need to avoid pregnancy before or after vaccination.^{3,4} If you become pregnant after your first dose, you might choose to have the second dose during pregnancy or wait until after your pregnancy; however there is good data on the safety of Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine in pregnancy and it is important to remember you will only have the best possible protection against COVID-19 after you have two doses.³

If you are pregnant

The current recommendation for pregnant women is that they should be routinely offered the Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine at any stage of pregnancy.³ Vaccination is the best way to reduce the chance of severe illness from COVID-19 in pregnant women.³ It is unknown if there is an optimal time during pregnancy to have a Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine, either for the benefit of the mother or to protect her newborn, therefore it is recommended to have a Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine as soon as you are offered one.³ To ensure adequate protection, pregnant women are recommended to complete the routine schedule of Comirnaty (Pfizer), which is two doses given three weeks apart.³

This recommendation has been changed recently because world-wide information has now been collected and reports have shown that mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, such as Comirnaty (Pfizer) are safe to use in pregnant women.³ This research has not yet been completed for COVID-19 Vaccine Astra-Zeneca.³ Research has also shown that the antibodies produced by vaccination cross the placenta and may provide some protection to newborn infants.³

COVID-19 vaccine side effects

Common side effects reported following COVID-19 vaccination include soreness at the injection site, headache, muscle pain, fever, chills and tiredness.³ If you experience these symptoms, you can take paracetamol³. It is not suggested that you need to take paracetamol before having a COVID-19 vaccine.³

COVID-19 vaccine timing in relation to other vaccines

An interval of at least seven days between a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and any other vaccine is suggested.³ This applies to both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.³ This may affect the timing of the two vaccines usually recommended during pregnancy:

- Influenza vaccine which may be given at any time during pregnancy
- Whooping cough vaccine which is usually given between 20 and 32 weeks of pregnancy³

However, this time interval may be shortened (including same day administration) in special circumstances, such as a tetanus prone wound or outbreak of influenza or COVID-19.³

If you decide to get a COVID-19 vaccine during your pregnancy, talk to your immunisation provider about making a schedule for each vaccine dose.³

Breastfeeding

There is no evidence that women who are breastfeeding while sick with COVID-19 have an increased risk of severe illness compared to women who are not breastfeeding.^{1,3} The virus that causes COVID-19 is unlikely to pass through breastmilk and the benefits of breastfeeding are greater than the risk of passing COVID-19 through the breastmilk.² Women who are breastfeeding while sick with COVID-19 can help prevent the virus passing the virus to their babies by washing their hands frequently and wearing a mask while breastfeeding.²

If you are breastfeeding, vaccination with Comirnaty (Pfizer) is recommended; you do not need to stop breastfeeding before or after vaccination.³ There is limited research on the safety of COVID-19 vaccines in breastfeeding women; however there are no concerns about their safety in breastfeeding women or their babies.^{1,3} The ingredients of the COVID-19 vaccine are not expected to pass into the breast milk and even if they did, they would be quickly destroyed in the baby's gut and it is extremely unlikely to have any effect on your baby.³

Useful links

COVID-19 Vaccines from MotherToBaby(OTIS), available at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/covid-19/>
COVID-19 Vaccination in Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women from The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists available at <https://rancog.edu.au/statements-guidelines/covid-19-statement/covid-19-vaccination-information>

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19). Available at URL: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>
2. Coronavirus (COVID-19)- A message for pregnant women and their families from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG), available at <https://ranzcof.edu.au/statements-guidelines/covid-19-statement/information-for-pregnant-women> [Accessed 27th April 2021].
3. Australian Government Department of Health. COVID-19 vaccination decision guide for women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning pregnancy. 17 June 2021; Version 4.1. Available from: www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-vaccination-covid-19-vaccination-decision-guide-for-women-who-are-pregnant-breastfeeding-or-planning-pregnancy [Accessed 24th June 2021].
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Information about COVID-19 Vaccines for People who are Pregnant or Breastfeeding. Updated March 18, 2021. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/pregnancy.html> [Accessed 20th April 2021].



NSW Medications in Pregnancy & Breastfeeding Service

For more information call MotherSafe: NSW Medications in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Service on 9382 6539 (Sydney Metropolitan Area) or 1800 647 848 (Non-Metropolitan Area) Monday –Friday 9am-5pm (excluding public holidays)