

November 2009

## Facts for Pregnant Women

### I'm pregnant – should I be concerned?

Pregnant women are not more likely to get H1N1 influenza, but if they do catch the virus, they may be more likely to have severe illness that may affect their pregnancy (ex. early delivery or miscarriage). While pregnant women are considered more likely to develop severe illness, the vast majority of pregnant women did not require medical or hospital care during the first wave of the pandemic in Manitoba. Any infectious illness can put a mother and unborn baby's health at risk. Generally, the risk of complications from H1N1, like pneumonia and severe respiratory distress, is greater in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy and for new mothers, within the four weeks after delivery. Complications from H1N1 flu in the mother may lead to harmful effects on the fetus.

### How can I prevent getting sick?

All Manitobans, including pregnant women, should take the same basic precautions, including:

- Cover your cough by coughing into your elbow or sleeve or use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Place the tissue in the garbage.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing. When soap and water are unavailable, hand sanitizer may be an acceptable alternative if hands are not visibly soiled.
- Limit touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Maintain your health by taking care of yourself and those in your care including eating a healthy balanced diet, avoiding cigarette smoke and other harmful substances, being active and getting enough rest and sleep.
- Get the H1N1 flu shot.

### Is getting the H1N1 flu shot recommended for pregnant women?

There will be two types of H1N1 flu vaccine available in Canada - one with adjuvant and one without. An adjuvant is a substance added to vaccine to boost people's immune response to the vaccine.

Immunization is the most effective way to prevent illness and protect your baby's health. The Public Health Agency of Canada has recommended that pregnant women at any stage of their pregnancy should receive the H1N1 flu shot without adjuvant. Although there is no evidence that the H1N1 flu shot with adjuvant is unsafe for pregnant women, this kind of vaccine hasn't been tested in pregnant women. Therefore, the vaccine without adjuvant is the first choice for pregnant women. Vaccine without adjuvant is made the same way as the regular seasonal flu shot, which has been used safely in pregnant women for many years.

The agency has also advised that if the H1N1 flu shot without adjuvant is not easily available and pandemic H1N1 flu rates are high or increasing, women who are 20 weeks or more pregnant or women at any stage of pregnancy who have a chronic medical condition (like asthma or diabetes) can consider getting the H1N1 flu shot with adjuvant. Women who are less than 20 weeks pregnant and are healthy can wait to get the vaccine without adjuvant.

Pregnant women should talk to their health care provider about which pandemic flu shot is best for them.

### **What symptoms of H1N1 flu should I watch for?**

Typically, flu symptoms include fever and a cough that come on suddenly, and sometimes can include sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain or tiredness. People may also feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea, and fever may not always be prominent.

### **When should I go to my doctor?**

Early treatment (**within 24 to 48 hours**) can help to reduce the risk of severe illness, so pregnant women with flu symptoms should visit a health care provider as soon as they can. Pregnant women who have symptoms of a more severe illness such as shortness of breath, dehydration or severe weakness, or whose other symptoms get worse, should seek immediate medical care. Pregnant women should also see their health care provider if they do not get better as they normally would, even if they've already seen them about their illness.

### **Do pregnant women need a different kind of treatment for H1N1 flu?**

You may be prescribed an antiviral to help treat your symptoms. Your health care provider will decide this with you. Antivirals are prescription medications used to treat the flu. They are most effective if given as soon as possible after symptoms start. While they do not make you immune to the virus, if taken within the first 48 hours of getting sick, they can reduce flu symptoms, shorten the length of illness and may reduce serious complications.

Antivirals have been licensed by Health Canada to be used during pregnancy. Women can safely take antiviral medications while breastfeeding. Only low amounts of antiviral medication are passed through breast milk and breast milk continues to be a baby's first line of defense against all illnesses.

### **Should I try to delay getting pregnant because of the risks from H1N1?**

Deciding when to become pregnant is a personal decision and you may want to speak with your health care provider. Public health officials have advised Manitobans to continue to go about their daily lives as H1N1 circulates while taking appropriate precautions.

### **If someone at home is sick, should I wear a mask?**

It is not recommended that healthy people wear masks as they go about their daily routines. This is because wearing masks in your home would not be expected to prevent the spread of influenza. Improper use may actually increase the risk of spreading the infection. If someone in your home has a flu-like illness, you have likely been exposed to the ill person, or the same source as the ill person, before symptoms appeared.

## **If someone at work is or has been sick, what should I do?**

The likelihood of being exposed to H1N1 flu at work is generally the same as it would be in any other public setting or at home. While at work pregnant women should wash their hands regularly and follow the same basic precautions they would in any other setting. Masks are not recommended at work even if colleagues or clients have been ill. If someone in your workplace has flu symptoms, they should stay home until they feel better. If you have concerns about your workplace and its pandemic preparedness, speak to your employer, contact Manitoba Workplace Safety and Health, call your local public health office or visit [www.manitoba.ca/flu](http://www.manitoba.ca/flu) for more information.

## **What if I am feeling anxious or scared?**

Although some adults may become very fearful about what might happen during a pandemic, others may not worry at all. Both reactions are normal. To prevent or deal with a stress reaction, plan for the future but live in the present. Maintain routines, connect with friends and family, limit media consumption and take care of your health. If you are feeling particularly worried and stressed, use the skills and experiences you have used in the past to help you manage any current anxiety. Talk to others, practice breath awareness, use spiritual or personal beliefs and seek help if needed.

For more information on coping mechanisms, please see the fact sheet: *Coping with H1N1 Flu*.

## **Where can I get more information?**

For more information about H1N1 flu, contact your health care provider, call **Health Links–Info Santé** at **788-8200** or **1-888-315-9257** (toll-free) or visit [www.manitoba.ca/flu](http://www.manitoba.ca/flu).