

For a healthy pregnancy, be wise and immunize

By Teddi Nicolaus

Whether you're already pregnant or planning to become so, you're probably already thinking about how to give your future child a healthy start.

Pregnancy is a busy time, and you'll have plenty to do to get ready. But it's important to put vaccines at the top of your to-do list.

Getting recommended vaccines is one of the best things you can do to keep yourself and your soon-to-be newborn healthy. A baby's immune system doesn't fully develop until they are two or three months old, so the vaccinations you receive during pregnancy give them an extra boost of protection in their first few months of life.

Vaccines are used by millions of pregnant people annually in the U.S. Science shows that receiving vaccines during pregnancy is both safe and beneficial for you and your growing bundle of joy. In fact, vaccines are so successful at saving lives and keeping people healthy that they're considered



one of the top public health achievements of the 20th century.

Baby's best bet for protection

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says vaccinations against four diseases are especially important for a healthy pregnancy. The diseases are pertussis, also known as whooping cough; influenza; COVID-19; and RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus.

Whooping cough can be dangerous for a newborn. Sadly, about 70% of deaths from whooping cough are among babies younger than eight weeks old.

Babies can't receive their first dose of whooping cough vaccine until they are 2 months of age, so the best way to protect your newborn is to get vaccinated against the disease during pregnancy. Doing so will help you create protective antibodies that you will pass on to your baby.

And then there's the flu. Getting the flu during pregnancy

puts you at higher risk of developing serious complications.

That's because pregnant women can experience changes to their immune systems that can make them more vulnerable to respiratory viruses. Fever from the flu may also be linked to birth defects. For that reason, CDC recommends that pregnant people receive a flu shot during any trimester of pregnancy.

Similarly, pregnant people should take steps to protect themselves from COVID-19.

"If you are pregnant and you get COVID, your chance of being hospitalized or dying from that virus is two- to three-fold greater than if you are a woman of the same age who isn't pregnant," says Paul A. Offit, MD, director of the Vaccine Education Center and physician in the Division of Infectious Diseases at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "When



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you get the COVID vaccine during pregnancy, you will then passively transfer antibodies to your baby that will protect the baby for the first four-to-six months of life."

Like flu and COVID-19, anyone can get RSV, a common and highly contagious respiratory illness that circulates between September and January. For many people, it causes mild, cold-like symptoms.

But infants younger than 6 months are at high risk for severe RSV-related complications like lung infections.

Receiving the RSV vaccine during pregnancy allows you to pass on antibodies in utero. That helps keep your baby safe during their first four to six months of life, which is when they are most vulnerable to severe respiratory illness that can lead to hospital visits.

"You have a responsibility to yourself and your unborn child to make sure that both of you are in the safest position possible, and vaccines provide that safety," Offit says.

Worried about the costs of vaccines? Don't be. If you don't have health insurance, you may be able to get vaccines through the federally funded Vaccines for Children Program. Your state health department can also provide information about free and low-cost vaccines.

For information, contact your state or local health department or call 1-800-232-4636 for help in English and Spanish.



Don't wait to vaccinate

If you're planning to become pregnant, don't wait until your pregnancy test comes up positive to get up to date on vaccines.

For example, measles is one of the world's most contagious diseases, and unvaccinated young children and pregnant people are at very high risk of severe measles complications.

CDC recommends that the measles, mumps, rubella — or MMR — vaccine be given at least a month before pregnancy if you didn't get the vaccine as a child. Certain vaccines, such as the MMR and chickenpox vaccines, should be given before or after pregnancy.

Getting infected with rubella during pregnancy puts your future child at high risk for birth defects, Offit says.

"We have virtually eliminated rubella from this country, but rubella still exists in the world, so you need to make sure you are rubella-immune before you are pregnant," he says.

Talk to your doctor to find out which vaccines are best for you.

