

# Influenza (Flu) and Pregnancy



Influenza (the flu) is an infection of the respiratory tract. The tract is made up of your mouth, nose, and lungs, and the tubes between them. The flu can make a pregnant person very ill. This is because changes that occur during pregnancy to the immune system, heart, and lungs make a pregnant person more likely to develop flu complications. These include sinus infections and serious lung infections, such as bronchitis and pneumonia. The flu can cause high fevers, which can cause birth defects and other complications in the developing fetus. In rare cases, the flu can lead to miscarriage or even death of the pregnant person. This sheet tells you more about the flu, what to do if you get the flu, and what you can do to prevent infection.

## Who is at risk for the flu?

Anyone can get the flu. But you are more likely to catch the flu if you:

- Are often around young children
- Work in a healthcare setting where you may be exposed to flu germs
- Live or work with someone who has the flu
- Haven't had the annual flu shot

## How does the flu spread?

The flu is caused by a virus. The virus spreads through the air in droplets when someone who has the flu coughs, sneezes, laughs, or talks. You can become infected when you breathe in the virus directly. You can also become infected when you touch a surface where the droplets have landed and then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. Touching used tissues, or sharing utensils, drinking glasses, or a toothbrush with an infected person can expose you to the flu virus, too.

## What are the symptoms of the flu?

Flu symptoms tend to start quickly and may last a few days to a few weeks. They include:

- Fever that's usually higher than 100.4°F ( 38°C) and chills
- Sore throat and headache
- Dry cough
- Runny nose
- Tiredness and weakness
- Body and muscle aches

## If you are pregnant and have flu-like symptoms

Call your healthcare provider right away. Follow any directions they give you. You may be asked to get tested to confirm that you have the flu.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe medicines called antivirals. These medicines must be taken within 2 days of when your symptoms started. In some cases, your healthcare provider may not wait for test results to come back before starting you on antivirals.

These medicines work by stopping the flu virus from reproducing in your body. This gives your body's immune system a chance to fight the virus. After taking the medicine, your symptoms may be milder, and you may recover quicker than without the medicine. The medicine may also prevent serious complications, such as pneumonia. Antivirals are considered safe during pregnancy, but talk with your healthcare provider if you have any concerns.

## Easing flu symptoms

- Drink lots of fluids, such as water, juice, and warm soup to prevent dehydration. A good rule is to drink enough so that you urinate your normal amount. Feeling dizzy or lightheaded most likely means you need to drink more fluid.
- Get plenty of rest.
- If you aren't hungry, eat smaller meals more often during the day to make sure you get enough calories.
- If you don't have a fever, put warm compresses on your forehead or sinuses to ease congestion.
- If you need medicines to ease symptoms, ask your healthcare provider which ones are safe for you to take.
- Call your healthcare provider if you become short of breath.

## Preventing the flu



- Get vaccinated. One of the best ways to prevent the flu is to get a flu shot. Pregnant people can safely get a flu shot. But pregnant people should not get the nasal spray vaccine for the flu. This is a live-virus vaccine and may be harmful to the baby.
- Wash your hands often. Frequent handwashing is a proven way to prevent infection. Carry an alcohol-based hand gel that has at least 60% alcohol. Use it when you don't have access to soap and water.
- Clean items you use often with disinfectant wipes. This includes phones, computer keyboards, and toys.
- Stay away from crowds and children as much as possible while you are pregnant. Stay away from anyone who has the flu.

## Tips for good handwashing

Handwashing is one of the best ways to prevent many common infections. Follow these steps for more effective handwashing:

- Use warm water and plenty of soap. Work up a good lather.

- Clean the whole hand, under your nails, between your fingers, and up the wrists.
- Wash for at least 20 seconds. Don't just wipe—scrub well.
- Rinse, letting the water run down your fingers, not up your wrists.
- Dry your hands well. Use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the door.

## Using alcohol-based hand gel

Alcohol-based hand gels are also a good choice for cleaning your hands. Use them when you don't have access to soap and water. Follow these steps:

- Squeeze about a tablespoon of gel into the palm of one hand.
- Rub your hands together briskly, cleaning the backs of your hands, the palms, between your fingers, and up the wrists.
- Rub until the gel is gone and your hands are completely dry.

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