

H1N1 Pandemic Flu: Information for Pregnant Women

The H1N1 pandemic flu virus (once known as “swine flu”) is causing illness in people in the United States and in countries around the world. The symptoms of H1N1 pandemic flu are similar to the regular seasonal flu and may include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Symptoms of H1N1 may also include diarrhea and vomiting.

We know from studies of regular seasonal flu that pregnant women with the flu are more likely to be hospitalized for heart or lung problems especially in late pregnancy. Early evidence suggests that this is also the case with pandemic H1N1 flu virus. Therefore, we are urging our patients to take extra precautions this flu season.

Below is information for our pregnant patients who may be exposed to the H1N1 virus. This information is adapted from guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/pregnant.htm>) and local public health authorities.

How can I protect myself and my baby?

The flu virus is spread from person to person when droplets from a cough or sneeze from an infected person are propelled through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby, or when someone touches a person or object containing respiratory droplets and then touches the mouth or nose before washing hands.

To reduce your risk of catching or spreading H1N1 flu, take these everyday precautions:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, or sneeze into your sleeve.
- Wash your hands for 15 to 20 seconds with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and warm water several times per day and use a paper towel or a personal hand towel for drying your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people with flu symptoms.
- If someone in your home develops flu-like symptoms (fever of 100 degrees or greater plus cough or sore throat), have a plan to reduce your risk of getting infected. Where possible this should include:
 1. Isolating the sick person in a single room.
 2. Not having the pregnant woman be the caretaker of the sick person.
 3. Having the sick person wear a mask or at least cover his or her nose and mouth with facial tissue when coughing or sneezing.

Also, ask your doctor if you should take an antiviral medication to further reduce the risk of developing H1N1 flu yourself. Antiviral medications to prevent H1N1 flu may be used for pregnant women who live with a person who has documented H1N1 infection or at least a flu-like illness (temperature greater than 100 degrees plus respiratory symptoms like a cough).

- Stock up on household, health and emergency supplies, such as water, acetaminophen (Tylenol) and non-perishable food in case your doctor recommends staying home for several days to avoid catching or spreading flu.

What should I do if I think I may have H1N1 flu?

If you get sick with flu-like symptoms, stay home, limit contact with others, and call your primary care doctor right away. Your doctor will decide if testing or treatment is needed. Like regular flu, H1N1 flu may make other medical problems worse. If you are alone at any time when you are feeling ill, have someone check in with you regularly.

If I get H1N1 flu, how should I treat it?

- Ask your doctor to recommend a fever-relief medication. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is typically the best treatment of fever in pregnancy.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.
- If your doctor recommends a prescription antiviral drug such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza), take it as directed. These medications can make you feel better faster and lessen your flu symptoms. They work best when started within two days of the onset of flu symptoms, but may also be given to high risk people, like pregnant women, even after 48 hours. People with flu typically take antiviral drugs for five days. *Note: If a widespread H1N1 outbreak occurs, these antiviral drugs may be in short supply. They will be given first to people who are hospitalized or at high risk of severe illness from flu.*

Are antiviral drugs safe for my baby?

Antiviral drugs have not been tested to determine their effect in pregnant women or their babies. However, so far, no serious side effects have been reported to the CDC. Based on limited evidence so far, many experts feel the potential benefit of these drugs in pregnant women with pandemic H1N1 infection outweighs any potential risks. Oseltamivir may cause nausea and vomiting in 10 to 15 percent of persons, and zanamivir should not be used in persons who have asthma, wheezing or other lung disease. If you think you may be experiencing a medication side effect once you start taking antiviral drugs, call your doctor before taking any other action, including stopping the medication. It is also ok to take antiviral medications while breastfeeding.

What are warning signs of illness that require emergency medical care?

Seek emergency medical care if you:

- Have difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Have pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Experiences sudden dizziness
- Experience confusion
- Experiences severe or persistent vomiting
- Notice decreases or no movement of your baby
- Have a high fever that is not responding to acetaminophen (Tylenol)

After delivery, can I breastfeed even if I am sick?

Flu can be very serious in young babies, but those who are breast fed typically do not get as sick and are sick less often from flu. When a baby breastfeeds, the mother's antibodies pass to the baby through the milk. To ensure babies get the full benefit of their mothers' antibodies, experts at the CDC encourage mothers to continue breastfeeding even if they become ill.

- Breastfeed often and limit formula feedings.
- To reduce the spread of the virus, avoid coughing or sneezing in the baby's face and wash your hands with soap and water before picking up your baby. You may even want to wear an infection-prevention mask in case you accidentally cough or sneeze on your baby.
- If you are too sick to breastfeed, use a breast pump and have someone give the expressed milk to your baby.