

Vaccinating family members offers important flu protection to newborns

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Vaccinating new mothers and other family members against influenza before their newborns leave the hospital creates a "cocooning effect" that may shelter unprotected children from the flu, a virus that can be life-threatening to infants, according to researchers at Duke Children's Hospital.

The hospital-based outreach tested in this study proved effective at boosting immunization rates in parents – especially new fathers – and siblings who otherwise may not be vaccinated.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not recommend vaccinating newborns for flu because they're too young, however they're a part of the population that is at highest risk," explains Emmanuel (Chip) Walter, MD, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Duke Children's Hospital. He presented the findings of the CDC-funded study at the annual ICAAC/IDSA meeting in Washington, DC.

"Newborns have the highest rate of hospitalizations due to influenza when compared to any other age group of children. Their rates of influenza-related hospitalization are similar to people age 80 and older. And, in some seasons the influenza-associated mortality rate is highest among infants. We want to protect the newborn by vaccinating the entire family, and send parents home with one less thing to worry about."

The study was carried out from October 2007 to February 2008 at Durham Regional Hospital. Educational material was distributed to new

mothers, and a flu vaccine clinic was set up to facilitate the vaccinations for other family members around the time of a newborn's birth. Duke University Medical Center served as the comparison site.

Walter reported that vaccination coverage of new mothers and other family members increased 16 percent at Durham Regional when judged against the comparison site. And, while the researchers were encouraged to learn that approximately 40 percent of pregnant women had received vaccinations – more than previously noted – their efforts resulted in an additional 45 percent of new mothers who had not received a flu shot during pregnancy choosing to be vaccinated. Equally significant was the number of new dads and siblings who received the flu shot when compared to the comparison site.

"Our study shows that offering the flu vaccine to new mothers during their baby's stay in the hospital is an effective way to assure that all women have the opportunity to get vaccinated and thereby protect their own health and the health of their baby," says Walter. "It also proved to be a convenient, and possibly the most effective way for fathers to be vaccinated. Protection of the newborn from the dangers of influenza is maximized when those who have the closest contact are vaccinated."

Source: Duke University Medical Center

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