

COVID-19 vaccination is critical for anyone who is pregnant or trying to conceive

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Elana Tal, MD, clinical assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology, got both vaccines while trying to conceive; she received the booster when she was in her seventh month. Credit: Doug Levere

Physicians at the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at the University at Buffalo are urging anyone who is pregnant or trying to conceive to prioritize getting all three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine (two doses and the booster) as soon as they can.

The current surge of infections, increased socializing during the holidays and the detection of the omicron variant are all putting everyone, especially unvaccinated pregnant people, at much higher risk, they say.

"The data we now have on what can happen to you and your baby if you are unvaccinated and become infected with COVID-19 during pregnancy are truly alarming," said Allison Brashear, MD, vice president for [health sciences](#) and dean of the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at UB.

The urgent focus on pregnancy emerged from discussions among members of the COVID Surge committee that Brashear convened since her arrival in Western New York earlier this month. The committee is comprised of physicians and researchers from throughout UB's five health sciences schools.

Among people who are pregnant, the rate of vaccination is far lower than for the adult population as a whole, possibly as low as 20 percent and in some geographic areas, even lower.

Severe illness, and even death

Those who are pregnant and get infected with SARS-CoV2 are not only more vulnerable to developing [severe illness](#) and requiring hospitalization, but some even die from it, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Pregnant women have an increased risk of severe illness and hospitalization from a COVID-19 infection, which can have devastating effects on a pregnancy and the fetus like pre-term birth, stillbirth and other complications," said Gale Burstein, MD, Erie County Commissioner of Health and clinical professor of pediatrics in the Jacobs School.

Tom Russo, MD, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases in the Department of Medicine in the Jacobs School and a physician with UBMD Internal Medicine, noted that new medical data on how COVID-19 affects pregnancy continues to be alarming.

"Pregnant women with COVID-19 have a significantly worse outcome," said Russo. "They are more likely than uninfected [pregnant women](#) to deliver prematurely, end up in the ICU, require mechanical ventilation, and die. Recent data also suggests there is an increase in stillbirths in women infected with COVID compared to those not infected.

"The best way to reduce all these risks is to get vaccinated with either the Pfizer or Moderna [vaccine](#), both of which have been shown to be safe for both mother and baby," said Russo.

A personal story of vaccination during pregnancy

Those data resonated with Elana Tal, MD, clinical assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology in the Jacobs School and a physician with

UBMD Obstetrics and Gynecology, who is in her eighth month of pregnancy.

Tal received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it was available for health-care workers while she was trying to conceive; a few months later, she found out she was pregnant. She received her booster shot during her seventh month.

Tal eagerly shares her personal story with pregnant patients who are wary about the vaccine and haven't received it yet. (See video)

"A lot of misinformation about the vaccines came out early in the pandemic and since then, we've gotten a ton of really good, high-quality, scientific data that show that the vaccine is safe both when you're trying to conceive and throughout pregnancy," says Tal. "It doesn't cause miscarriage and it doesn't cause sterility."

Combating misinformation

"As a doctor, I see my role as interpreting the medical literature and giving relevant information to my patients in order to combat the misinformation that's out there about COVID-19 vaccines and pregnancy," she continued. "I feel really grateful that there is so much good literature that shows the vaccine is safe and effective in pregnancy."

Burstein noted that outcomes from COVID-19 vaccination for all patients are continuously monitored. "Both the CDC and FDA are conducting continuous COVID-19 vaccine safety monitoring, as they do for all vaccines," she said. "With anticipated surges in COVID-19 cases related to the omicron variant, there's never been a better time for people who are pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant to get a COVID-19 vaccine. It will provide an additional layer of protection for you and your

family."

And COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy provides an additional bonus: potential immunity for the baby.

"Importantly, babies can acquire antibodies from their vaccinated moms during pregnancy and with nursing, which may protect them from subsequently getting COVID," Russo said. "So, if you are pregnant or planning on getting pregnant, please get vaccinated and boosted when eligible. It is in yours and your baby's best interests."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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