Pregnant women are renowned for avoiding any substance, food or ingredient that they believe might pose the slightest threat of harm to their unborn child. Traditionally, the list of shunned products has included medications, coffee or tea (or both), even a drop of alcohol, and needless to say, cigarette smoke.

What about vaccines? While there is at least a semblance of scientific support for avoiding many of the exposures I mentioned above, what’s the story with immunizations against preventable contagions microbes that can possibly harm both mother and fetus?

Medical scientists have long known that the protection conferred by vaccines for pregnant women far outweighs any possible risk of harm from the shots. Unfortunately much like the widespread but completely unjustified fear of children’s vaccines moms-to-be also have a strong tendency to avoid getting vaccinated. The most recent stats show that only about 40 percent of pregnant women have received the seasonal flu shot and that was even an improvement from only a few years ago. The 2009 Swine flu scare convinced many women to forego their fears and get vaccinated, and some of that reasoning has, thankfully, taken hold.

Now, a just-published study [1] from researchers at the University of Texas in Dallas re-affirms that vaccination against influenza in early pregnancy the first trimester is not only safe, but actually promotes better outcomes for both mother and newborn.

A group of researchers in the Ob-Gyn department at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas evaluated nearly 9,000 pregnant women who received the influenza seasonal vaccine, and compared their pregnancy experiences, including deliveries, and those of their newborns, to those of 77,000 women who failed to get immunized. The results showed that not only were there fewer birth defects and stillbirths among the vaccinees but there was a lower rate of neonatal death (within the first month of life) among the infants whose mothers got the vaccine.

We know that flu vaccination is safe and effective but we didn’t fully appreciate its manifold benefits for pregnant women, until now. Since a key factor in getting those hyper-cautious pregnant women to accept the vaccine is advice from a doctor, it is to be hoped that obstetricians will join in the chorus [2] of those advocating the necessity for moms-to-be to get vaccinated!
The new study confirms numerous previous researches on the same topic. In 2010, scientist from the University of Washington-Seattle studied a group of over 1,100 Native American moms and their newborns. Half got flu shots, half did not; the results showed [3] that both the women and the babies who got the shot had substantially lower risk of contracting influenza, and a huge reduction in severe flu requiring hospitalization.

This is so important because (among other reasons) newborns up until age 6 months are not eligible to get their own vaccination, so they are dependent on their mothers for immunity as with so many other things!

So moms-to-be, and moms already, for your own sake and that of your growing babies, get that flu shot as soon as possible: flu vaccination season is here!

*By ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross, MD. Originally published Aug. 29, 2012* [4].

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**Source URL:** https://www.acsh.org/news/2012/08/29/flu-vaccine-and-pregnancy-perfect-together

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