

## **Pregnancy and the flu**

By Caren Fairweather

Flu season is upon us and this year it is causing more concern than usual. Pregnant women and infants younger than six months are especially vulnerable to becoming severely ill. Pregnant women who come down with the flu are at increased risk of complications during pregnancy. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), pregnant women who get the flu are four times more likely to be hospitalized than the general public. Flu symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, aches, headache, chills, fatigue, diarrhea and vomiting. Call your doctor or health care provider immediately if you experience these symptoms. Antiviral prescription drugs like Tamiflu® will help shorten your illness and make you feel better.

But like any threat to your health or your baby's health, taking steps to prevent flu is the most effective course of action. The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) recommends that all pregnant women take both the seasonal flu vaccine and the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine during any trimester of pregnancy. Pregnant women should avoid the live virus nasal spray form of vaccine. If you are pregnant or the parent of a child younger than three years of age and concerned about the preservative thimerosal in vaccines, tell your health care provider that you would like the single dose vaccine that is preservative free.

Infants younger than six months should not get the flu vaccine. Pregnant women who take the flu vaccination pass immunity to their unborn babies. If your baby is born during flu season, breastfeeding exclusively is the best protection you can give your baby. If you come down with the flu, continue breastfeeding or pump your milk so that someone else can bottle feed breast milk to your baby.

Hand washing or using alcohol-based hand gel helps prevent the spread of flu. Drink lots of water to prevent dehydration. If you are pregnant acetaminophen (Tylenol®) is the preferred over-the-counter drug to reduce fever. As with all upper respiratory illnesses, get as much rest as possible. Avoid sneezing or coughing on your baby. Ask your provider about wearing a face mask to prevent spreading flu germs to your baby.

If you or your baby has severe symptoms, you must get emergency treatment immediately. Difficulty breathing, chest pain, abdominal pain, persistent vomiting, high persistent fever and no movement of your baby warrant emergency medical care.

Seasonal flu vaccination is available now. It will protect you against the most common flu viruses expected to be in circulation this flu season. County health departments, community health centers, medical doctors, some hospitals and some pharmacies offer seasonal flu vaccinations. By mid-October the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine will be available through these same channels. It will protect against one specific type of flu virus, swine flu. It is safe to get both vaccines at the same time, in different parts of your body, according to the US Center for Disease Control (CDC). Some people will have

mild symptoms from vaccines including aches where you got the shot, tiredness and mild cold symptoms.

The NYSDOH and the CDC recommend that people who live with or care for infants younger than six months take both vaccines. Other high priority groups are health care workers, people between the ages of six months and age twenty-four, and people between the ages of twenty five and sixty five.

A fact sheet “Advice for Women Who Are Pregnant” is available at Maternal-Infant Services Network’s website: [www.misn-ny.org](http://www.misn-ny.org). Or go directly to the New York State Department of Health for H1N1 flu information that is updated weekly: [www.nyhealth.gov](http://www.nyhealth.gov). or [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov). To speak with someone or get your questions about the flu answered call the New York State Toll Free Hotline: 1-800-808-1987.

*Caren Fairweather, MPS, is executive director for Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a not-for-profit organization that coordinates health and human services for pregnant women and children. Visit our website at [www.misn-ny.org](http://www.misn-ny.org) or call 1-800-453-4666 for more information.*