

COVID Vaccinations in pregnancy and breastfeeding Live Question and Answer Session September 9th 2021 Summary

This event is aiming to provide information to provide reassurance and to give you the opportunity to ask any questions you might have in relation to COVID-19 vaccination and pregnancy.

- **Suzanne Meredith**, Deputy Director of Public Health at Norfolk County Council
- **Tracy Williams**, Advanced Nurse Practitioner and CCG governing body member with the portfolio for addressing inequalities
- **Nicola Lovett**, Lead Midwife for the Norfolk and Waveney local maternity and neonatal system (LMNS)
- **Dr Sarah Flindall**, GP partner in Great Yarmouth at East Norfolk Medical Practice and clinical advisor for the LMNS

The national picture (Suzanne Meredith):

The latest advice is that COVID-19 vaccines are recommended in pregnancy and pregnant women are encouraged to have the vaccine because it is the best way to protect you from COVID-19 and its effects.

We're seeing increasing amounts of research and evidence that is showing that significant numbers of pregnant women in the UK and other countries such as the USA, have safely had the vaccine with no serious adverse effects to themselves or their babies, so we're seeing real life evidence coming through that the vaccine is safe.

We're also getting some increasing evidence from the UK obstetric surveillance system, the system that monitors lots of information about every pregnancy and their outcomes, and they're reporting back to us that over the months of May to July this year of all the ladies who were hospitalized due to COVID complications during pregnancy, 98% of those had not had their vaccine. There were no pregnant women who had both doses of their vaccine admitted to hospital during that time. That's really positive signs that the vaccine is working, and protecting women, and also that the double vaccination is proving to be really effective.

The virus is now spreading more widely in our communities. As we're opening up to normal life, and so there's more chance of catching it where we go. Most pregnant women if they catch COVID, will generally have very minor symptoms but a small, but increasing number of pregnant women who are developing serious illness from COVID-19, and they are getting associated complications in their pregnancies that are really quite serious. So this has led to trusted experts across the country, including people from the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, and from the Royal College of Midwives. They are now recommending that all pregnant

women are vaccinated because vaccination is the best way to reduce the risk of getting COVID-19 and then getting seriously unwell with it.

Local Hot Topics (Dr Flindall):

These are the sort of questions that I might have in my consultations and maybe these are some of the things that you've been worrying about.

Q. Will my baby be affected by the vaccine?

A. Yes, but in a very positive way. We know that as you progress through your pregnancy, your risk increases. If we vaccinate you, then that risk is considerably reduced. If we keep you safe, we keep your baby safe. There's the bonus that by vaccinating, you will create antibodies and some of those antibodies will go on to protect your baby before they're born and give their immature developing immune system a big boost, which you can then increase further by breast feeding them for their first few days.

Q. Shouldn't I just wait until my baby is born?

A. No, please don't - we vaccinated millions of people worldwide and we need you to be vaccinated now for all the reasons that I've just explained we need you protected early in your pregnancy and we need to know that your baby is going to have some antibodies to protect them.

Q. What side effects might I have if I have the vaccine?

A. We know that over 150,000 pregnant ladies have been vaccinated in countries such as the United States. Our expectation of side effects would be the same as any other person of a similar age who wasn't pregnant to yourself. So, you're going to feel that achy arm, a bit stiffer to lift, and you may well feel a little bit hot and tired. They are the same effects that you might have if you had the flu vaccine and the whooping cough vaccine, both of which we would recommend and have been for many years in pregnancy.

Q. The vaccine was developed very quickly and hasn't been tested on pregnant women. How do we know it's safe?

A. This type of vaccine has been more researched and more widely discussed both at Government, Scientific and Media levels than any other medical intervention. So, we know that it's as good as we can make it, and we are therefore ready to offer it to you. And you are not the test group - we've already used it on many hundreds of thousands of women. So yes, we do know it's safe.

Q. Should I breastfeed if I have had the vaccine?

A. Yes, you should breastfeed after having the vaccine. We know it's safe, and we know it's been tried, and we know that it will help to protect you and your child.

Q. Will the vaccine affect my fertility in the future?

A. The long-term impact on fertility has been raised and there are studies done on animals who have a much faster reproduction rate to show there is no change in DNA content within egg or sperm nor known impact on fertility. To put this in perspective we know the positive impact of healthy lifestyle choices and indeed negative impact of others on fertility.

Questions from the public:

Q. What are you recommending for women that have had their first Astra Zeneca before becoming pregnant? I'm struggling to find any real assurance in terms of safety of the vaccine in pregnancy but have been told that I must have the Astra Zeneca as my second dose despite this.

A. Tracy Williams - we are currently recommending that people have the same vaccine for both doses because that will give you the maximum production of antibodies for safety and protection from COVID-19. There have been worldwide studies with the vaccines and we know they are safe but the studies have not been within pregnancy. We do appreciate the concerns that people have with the Astra Zeneca vaccine, and we are now offering Pfizer and Moderna as well. But having had one dose of the Astra Zeneca vaccine without any problems, feel reassured that you shouldn't go on to have any serious side effects with the second one.

Q. What data is there to prove the vaccine is 100% safe for both mother and baby?

A. Suzanne Meredith - we've touched on this a couple of times already about the safety of the vaccine – we know that when the original studies took place, they didn't use pregnant women because studies generally don't use pregnant women. But we know since then there's been real world live data, and additional research studies looking into any adverse effects, looking at a large number of people, particularly in the United States. Over 148,000 pregnant people have been vaccinated in the United States, over 62,000 in England and over 4000 in Scotland. And there is a system in place to make sure any adverse effects are noted and reported, with people constantly reviewing them to look for issues that would cause concern. No serious adverse effects have shown up, so we are assured that the vaccine is safe. If anything does come up there is a follow up system in place and people are continually monitoring this as well.

Q. I'm pregnant. Where can I get my vaccine? Is there a preferred place?

A. Nicola Lovett - You can have your vaccine anywhere where they offer vaccines, but if you're anxious and want to talk to a midwife first, all of our three acute hospital trusts now have sessions where they have vaccinators present within their ante Natal clinics, so I suggest that you talk to the midwife or antenatal clinic to find out when they will be available. You can also ask for a fast pass – your midwife can give you a red card which you can use to get to the front of the queue within the normal vaccination hubs at the hospital sites. But if you can't get to the hospital you can have your vaccine at any of the sites across Norfolk and Waveney. They will ask

you if you're pregnant and if you've got any more questions you can ask them to contact one of our LMNS midwives. There would be a little delay but we can ring you back.

Q. I'm currently trying to get pregnant. I've had the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccination should I delay a pregnancy until after the second dose?

A. Tracy Williams – yes, get that second vaccination as soon as you can, including in the early stages of pregnancy so you are protected.

Q. Can I have the vaccine during IVF treatment?

A. Sarah Flindall – According to the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the answer is yes. However, if you are already under a clinical team probably best just to discuss it with them briefly.

Q. What should I do if I develop a reaction to the vaccine?

A. Nicola Lovett - If it's a mild reaction like a 'heavy arm' feeling, a little bit headachy then just take some paracetamol, and you might just need to have an early night. If it is a severe reaction and a rash where you're quite unwell, you will need to let your GP know and you would need to report that.

Q. Am I more at risk of blood clots if I get my second dose of the Astra Zeneca whilst pregnant?

A. Sarah Flindall - When the issue around blood clots happened, that was one of the questions that everybody had. We knew that statistically pregnant women were more likely to develop clots full stop, but that has not proved to be the case and the clotting seems to be immune mediated and random. We recognise there is also an increased risk of clotting problems related to COVID infection itself. So, the simple answer is no. AstraZeneca has more recently been reserved for use in the older age group, the Pfizer and Moderna used in the younger cohorts. The recommendation for all those young people who had received their first vaccine using Astra Zeneca was to continue with this as a course, and no issues have been raised.

Q. How would we know if Baby has had an allergic reaction?

A. Tracy Williams - I think the question probably is asking us how would someone know if the baby before birth had an allergic reaction? Vaccinations work by getting you to produce antibodies, so the positive thing is that before birth the baby will have antibodies passed on from those that mum produces. Certainly, in pregnancy now we using the mRNA vaccines, which is the Pfizer and Moderna, and we know they are only in your body for a very short period of time whilst those antibodies are being produced. But monitoring a baby before birth for possible vaccine allergic reactions is not something that is done. If you are breastfeeding after having the COVID vaccine you also pass on your antibodies and we wouldn't expect your baby to have any allergic reaction if you were breast feeding.

A. Nicola Lovett - once the baby is born we're always looking at the health of baby generally. If you've had the vaccine while you're breastfeeding, we wouldn't expect the baby to have an allergic reaction. And the really exciting thing about breast milk is that vaccine antibodies have been found in the breast milk, so the baby is actually getting protection from the virus. The effects of that are yet to be seen - we don't know if it protects babies from catching the virus later on. We need to be looking out for babies all the time because once they're born they are exposed to many different things, so if you think your baby is unwell you need to seek medical help from your GP, from your midwife or your health visitor.

Information about the COVID-19 vaccinations and pregnancy, breastfeeding and fertility is available from <https://www.iustonenorfolk.nhs.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-faqs/covid-19-vaccinations>. A recording of the Live Q&A session can also be viewed here under the 'Pregnancy & breastfeeding Q&A' tab.

Booster Vaccinations – COVID booster vaccinations will begin to be offered across Norfolk & Waveney from 20 September 2021, in line with national and JCVI guidance. This is an additional third vaccine dose given no earlier than six months after completion of the first course of vaccination, to ensure continued protection against COVID as we go into winter. If you are pregnant and offered a booster, please take it. All the information contained here is also relevant to the booster programme. The NHS will contact you when it is your turn.

More information is available here:

<https://www.norfolkandwaveneyccg.nhs.uk/covid/booster-third-dose-covid-vaccinations>