

COVID-19 Vaccines, Pregnancy, and Breastfeeding

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A person can safely get the COVID-19 vaccine before they are pregnant or any time during their pregnancy or when breastfeeding.

Healthcare professionals and immunization experts in Canada and around the world strongly recommend getting a COVID-19 vaccine and any additional boosters when pregnant, nursing, or planning to become pregnant. The vaccines are safe and effective.

Risks of COVID-19 infection when pregnant

Most people who contract COVID-19 will have mild illness. However, COVID-19 infection when pregnant does increase the risk of medical complications and death. The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) finds that compared to those who are not pregnant, individuals who are pregnant and contract COVID-19 are:

- Two times more likely to be hospitalized
- Five times more likely to be admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU)
- More likely to suffer from severe illness
- More likely to require ventilation/life support breathing

In addition, NACI reports that COVID-19 infection when pregnant increases the risk of:

- Stillbirth
- Premature birth
- High blood pressure
- Caesarean delivery
- Low birth weight
- Admission to neonatal intensive care (NICU)

The benefits of COVID-19 vaccination

The vaccine will help protect against COVID-19 infection and reduce the risk of severe illness and complications from the virus when pregnant. Additionally, studies suggest that the antibodies your body develops after vaccination can help protect your baby from the virus after birth. The benefits of vaccination when pregnant far outweigh the risks.

Breastfeeding

It is safe to get the COVID-19 vaccine while breastfeeding. There is no need to stop or delay breastfeeding after getting vaccinated. The vaccine does not disrupt breastfeeding and does not have any harmful effects on your baby. The COVID-19 vaccine will help provide strong protection against the virus and help prevent you from passing it to your baby and other close contacts.

If you get vaccinated while breastfeeding, the vaccine itself will not transfer into breastmilk. Studies suggest that the antibodies you produce after receiving a vaccination will pass in the breastmilk and may protect your baby from COVID-19.

COVID-19 vaccines and fertility

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada affirm that getting the COVID-19 vaccine while planning to be pregnant is safe and effective. COVID-19 vaccines do not cause male or female infertility and there is no evidence to suggest that they can cause infertility in the future.

Getting both doses and any additional boosters of the COVID-19 vaccine before you are pregnant will protect you and your future baby from the increased risks of COVID-19 when pregnant.

The vaccine cannot give you COVID-19

You cannot get COVID-19 or other contagious illnesses from the vaccine because the vaccine does not contain any live virus.

It is important to remember that it typically takes a few weeks for the body to build immunity after vaccination. So, it is possible to become infected with COVID-19 just before or just after vaccination. This is because the vaccine has not had enough time for your immune response to make the antibodies to fight the virus if you come in contact with it.

Even if you receive the vaccine, please continue to follow public health measures and advice, such as staying home when sick to keep you, your loved ones, and your community safe.

Vaccine ingredients

The medical ingredient in both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines is messenger RNA (mRNA). mRNA is a molecule that gives cells instructions for making proteins. These proteins will start an immune response by making antibodies. These antibodies will recognize the real virus if you contract it in the future and help your body fight COVID-19 infection. The mRNA in these vaccines breaks down quickly after the vaccination is given, and does not remain permanently in the cells or body. The only other ingredients in the vaccines are fats, salts, and sugar. They help with storing, transporting and injecting the vaccine.

Vaccine side effects

Similar to medications and other vaccines, the COVID-19 vaccines can cause side effects. Most side effects are mild and go away within a few days after vaccination. Side effects may include:

- soreness in your arm where the needle was given
- tiredness
- chills
- a mild headache

These types of side effects are normal and simply mean the vaccine is working to produce protection against COVID-19.

Serious side effects and allergic reactions to vaccine are very rare. Please get medical care right away or call 911 if you have any of the following reactions within three days of receiving the vaccine:

- hives – swelling of the face, throat or mouth
- trouble breathing
- serious drowsiness
- high fever (over 40°C or 104°F)
- convulsions or seizures
- other serious symptoms (for example, “pins and needles” or numbness)

If you think you have had an adverse vaccine reaction, inform your health care provider.

Receiving a COVID-19 booster dose

It's recommended to receive all doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, including any booster doses you are eligible for. Receiving a booster dose helps restore immunity that may have decreased over time from your previous COVID-19 vaccines. It is best to receive an mRNA vaccine as a booster (such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine). The new bivalent mRNA booster vaccine targets both the original COVID-19 virus and the Omicron variant. It is recommended that pregnant individuals receive the bivalent booster after the minimum three-month (84-day) interval from a previous dose upon consultation with your health care provider to ensure the best possible protection ahead of the respiratory illness season.

Contracting COVID-19 after getting vaccinated

No vaccine is 100 percent, or completely, effective. As long as the virus keeps spreading, there will be some risk of COVID-19 infection. However, vaccination will reduce your risk of getting COVID-19, and make your symptoms milder if you are infected with COVID-19. Being vaccinated is the most important thing you can do to protect yourself, your baby and those around you from serious illness due to COVID-19. If you are pregnant and think you have COVID-19, it is important to tell the health professional providing your prenatal care (family doctor, midwife, and/or obstetrician).

Get the vaccine if you have already had COVID-19 and recovered

If you have already been sick with COVID-19, you should still get vaccinated. You will have some immunity to the virus, but it is unclear how long this immunity will last. You can get infected with COVID-19 again. You can also be contagious while not showing any symptoms and spread the virus to members of your family and others in your community. If you have yet to receive your primary series (first two or sometimes three doses) of a COVID-19 vaccine, you may receive the vaccine eight weeks after your symptom onset or positive test. During pregnancy, an interval of 3 months from a previous COVID-19 vaccine dose or SARS-CoV-2 infection is recommended for additional boosters.

If you are immunocompromised, you may be eligible to receive a booster dose earlier after a COVID-19 infection. Please speak with your health care provider to discuss optimal timing of your next booster.

For more information

Speak to your family doctor, nurse practitioner, midwife or obstetrician if you have questions or would like to discuss if COVID-19 vaccination is right for you.

You can also contact:

- VaxFacts Clinic Consultation Service at 416-438-2911 ext 5738
- SickKids COVID-19 Vaccine Consult Service at 437-881-3505
- The Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre at 1-833-943-3900
 - Speak to an experienced agent or health specialist, available 7 days a week from 8 am to 8 pm.

Vaccination Opportunities

Your health care provider or local pharmacy may offer COVID-19 vaccinations.

Huron Perth Public Health's vaccination opportunities can be found online at www.hpph.ca/GetVaccinated