

## Fact Sheet

# Influenza in Pregnancy

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### What is Influenza (the Flu)?

Influenza or 'the flu' is a serious infection of the the throat and lungs. It is most common during winter and is caused by a group of viruses known as the influenza viruses.

Symptoms of influenza include:

- High fever
- Headaches
- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Muscle aches

Influenza is not the same as the 'common cold,' which also gives you a sore throat and runny nose but which does not usually cause high fevers and muscle aches. However, sometimes the flu can also be quite mild, particularly in healthy young people.

### How do you catch influenza?

The flu is more common during winter months of the year. It is very contagious (meaning it is easy to catch). You catch the flu by breathing in tiny droplets found in the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You can also catch the virus by touching objects an infected person has touched.

### Why do we worry about pregnant women and influenza?

The changes that occur in pregnancy put these women at much greater risk of becoming very sick, and suffering serious complications caused by the flu, when compared to non-pregnant women of the same age.

Pregnancy weakens your immune system. Being pregnant also brings about changes to your lungs and heart, making you more likely to develop serious flu complications such as pneumonia (lung infection) which may need hospital treatment and admission to intensive care. In pregnancy, the flu can even become life threatening, with pregnant women being four times more likely to die from the flu than non-pregnant women. However, dying from the flu remains rare even in pregnancy.

Influenza can also be dangerous for your unborn baby. In early pregnancy, the illness can cause miscarriage while in later pregnancy, it may lead to stillbirth (the baby dying inside the uterus). The flu can also cause you to give birth earlier than expected (premature labour and birth).

**Vaccination during your pregnancy is recommended to protect you and your baby. This vaccine is safe and effective, and much, much safer than getting the flu! The flu shot is provided FREE to all pregnant women.**



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### What about newborn babies?

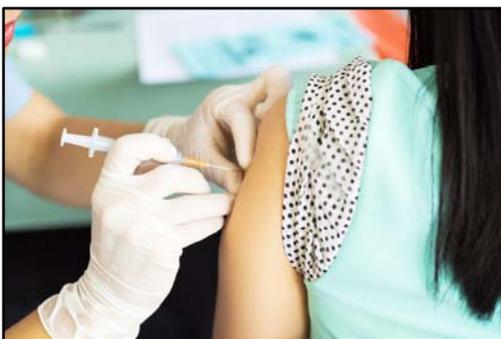
Newborn babies can also get the flu. Like pregnant women, young babies tend to become very sick with the flu and can get serious complications including:

- Pneumonia (lung infection)
- Middle ear infections
- Needing admission to hospital and the Intensive Care Unit

Babies cannot be vaccinated against the flu until they are 6 months old.

### How can I protect myself and my baby from the flu?

The best way to protect yourself and your baby is to have the flu shot (vaccine against influenza). The flu vaccine will decrease your chance of getting the flu by about 70%. Once you have had the flu shot, it will take about 2 weeks (sometimes up to 4 weeks) for you to develop antibodies (flu-blocking proteins in your blood) against the virus.



As well as protecting you from the flu, these antibodies cross over the placenta to protect your baby, resulting in a 50% lower chance of your baby getting the flu in the first 6 months of life compared with if you hadn't received a flu shot.

The antibodies which your baby gets from you last for 6 months after which the baby is old enough to get a flu vaccine and build up his, or her, own antibodies.

Antibodies also pass through to your baby with your breast milk, so breastfeeding is a good way to give your baby even better protection from the flu.

Other ways to decrease the risk of you or your newborn baby catching flu include:

- Staying away from people who have the flu
- Staying away from crowded places
- Making sure that all the people in your household and those who will be caring for, or having regular contact with, your baby also have the flu shot before your baby is born.

### Is it safe to have the flu vaccine when I am pregnant?

The flu vaccine has been specially 'inactivated' to give protection from the flu without any risk of catching the virus. This makes it very safe for use in pregnancy. The flu vaccine has been given to millions of pregnant women and a lot of research is available that shows it is very safe for pregnant women and their babies – and much, much safer than getting the flu!

**The National Immunisation Program provides FREE flu vaccination for all pregnant women. You can get the flu shot from your GP or some pharmacies**

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### Does the flu shot cause any side effects?

Most people (90%) do not experience any side effects and for the 10% of patients who *do* get side effects, they are nearly always mild. These side effects may include:

- Redness, soreness or swelling of the area where the flu shot was given; this is the commonest side effect; it lasts a few days
- Low fever, muscle aches or tiredness beginning soon after the vaccination; this can occasionally occur for a day or two after the flu shot; the symptoms are probably due to your immune system beginning to respond to the vaccine; it is not a 'flu-like' illness as a flu shot cannot give you the flu.

### When, during my pregnancy should I have the flu shot?

You can have the flu shot at any time during your pregnancy - the earlier in the flu season, the better. Having the vaccine well before the last four weeks of pregnancy will give your body time to make the antibodies and for them to cross over the placenta to protect your baby.

### I had the flu shot last winter, do I need another one this winter?

Yes, with the flu shot you need to have a vaccine every year to stay protected. This is because flu viruses are constantly changing and each winter a new vaccine is made which will protect you from the viruses that are the most common that winter.

Having had a flu shot last year will often give no protection for the flu viruses that are around this year.

### What should I do if I get the flu when I am pregnant?

If you get symptoms which you think might be the flu (even if you have had the flu shot) you should speak to your doctor as soon as you can. Your doctor may be able to give you anti-viral medication which will decrease the chance that you will get very sick from the flu.

Make sure you take regular paracetamol (Panadol™) while you are ill. This should prevent you from getting very high fevers which may be dangerous for your baby. Also it is important to:

- Stay away from other people to stop the spread of the virus
- Cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough and throw tissues away immediately
- Wash your hands often, particularly after coughing and sneezing.

### What should I do if I get the flu while I am breastfeeding?

If you get symptoms which you think might be the flu (even if you have had the flu shot) you should speak to your doctor as soon as you can. Your doctor may consider giving you anti-viral medication.

- Keep on breastfeeding
- Control your fevers with regular paracetamol (Panadol™)
- Stay away from other people to stop the spread of the virus
- Cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough and throw tissues away immediately
- Wash your hands often, particularly after coughing and sneezing

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### What should I do if my baby gets the flu?

- Contact your doctor as soon as possible so he or she can examine your baby and decide on treatment.
- Keep on breastfeeding
- Keep your baby away from other babies, children and any pregnant women.

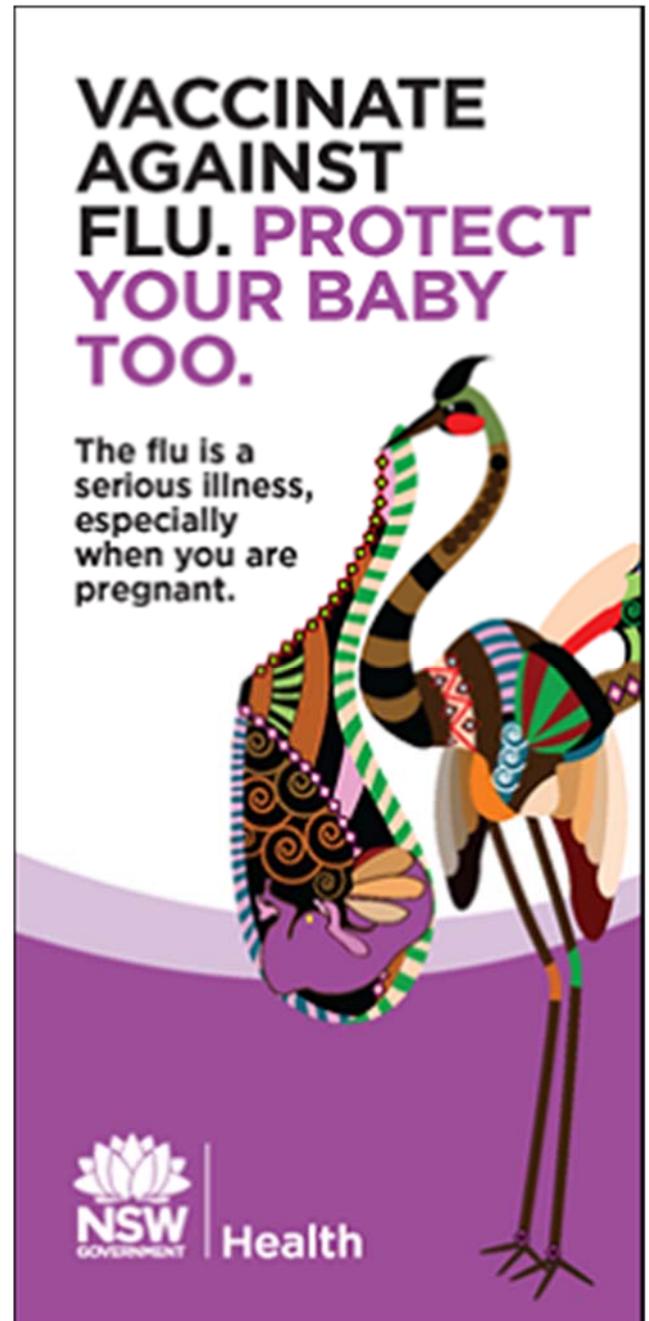
### Conclusion

Influenza is a common illness caused by a group of viruses that change each year which means that a new flu shot is needed each winter. Pregnant women and newborn babies tend to get much sicker from the flu than other people. Having a flu shot during your pregnancy not only protects you but also reduces, by about 50%, the chance of your baby catching influenza during the first 6 months of life.

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For more information, navigate to:

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Publications/pregnancy-brochure.pdf>