

Q&A

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Bivalent vaccines are here – what it means for people who are pregnant

Appointments for bivalent COVID-19 boosters have opened up across Canada. Yet, vaccination rates among people who are pregnant trail the general population, and people at all stages of pregnancy have questions about what the new vaccine formulation means for them.

Dr. Deborah Money, a professor in UBC's department of obstetrics and gynaecology, is leading a pan-Canadian study to monitor the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines in pregnant and lactating individuals. We spoke with Dr. Money about what expecting parents need to know about vaccinations this fall.

How are the bivalent boosters different?

The bivalent boosters are very similar to the original monovalent vaccine. The basic ingredients and underlying technology are the same. The only difference is that the bivalent booster contains two components. One targets the original coronavirus strain, while the other targets the new Omicron variants that are circulating in Canada right now.

Should people who are pregnant get a bivalent COVID-19 booster?

Absolutely. The Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology of Canada, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization and public health experts agree that people who are pregnant should receive a bivalent booster after completing the primary vaccine series or receiving a monovalent booster.

Evidence continues to show an increased risk associated with a COVID-19 infection during pregnancy. This is especially true for people who are unvaccinated, who face a higher risk of hospitalization and admission to the ICU, as well as higher rates of pre-term birth, lower birth weights and admissions to the neonatal intensive care unit. By getting vaccinated and staying up-to-date on boosters, you are helping your body produce antibodies that will protect you if you get exposed to COVID-19.

How do we know the bivalent vaccines are safe?

There is substantial evidence showing that mRNA vaccines are safe and effective to receive during pregnancy. To date, our national study on COVID-19 vaccines in pregnancy has surveyed more than 7,100 volunteers and shown no evidence of adverse events. Other independent studies in Canada and around the world have shown the same results.

The bivalent vaccines were authorized based on safety data from the original COVID-19 mRNA vaccines. Because the changes in the bivalent booster are small, regulators and scientists concluded it shouldn't change the safety profile of the vaccine. This is very similar to how new formulations of the flu vaccine are reviewed and approved each year.

Our research team, and many others, are continuing to monitor the safety of COVID-19 vaccines in pregnancy, including the bivalent boosters. We're encouraging people to participate in our national survey so we can continue to collect real-time information on the vaccine in pregnancy.

Will getting vaccinated during pregnancy protect my newborn from COVID-19?

There is accumulating data demonstrating that antibodies are passed to the fetus when a pregnant person is vaccinated for COVID-19. Studies have shown that infants born from a birth parent that received the vaccine during pregnancy had antibody levels comparable to the birth parent and a lower incidence of COVID-19 infection up to four months post birth. This can provide important protection to newborns until they are eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine at 6 months.

Can I get the flu shot at the same time as my COVID-19 booster? What about the Tdap vaccine?

Yes, you can receive the COVID-19 simultaneously with other vaccines. This includes the influenza and Tdap vaccines that are routinely administered during pregnancy.

All vaccines can have side effects, and sometimes these can be more pronounced when you receive two vaccines at once. While most people have mild or no side effects, the most common side effects may include fever, tiredness, body aches, and tenderness where the shot was given.

How should I time all these vaccines within my pregnancy?

Both the flu and COVID-19 vaccine, including boosters, can be given during any trimester. On the other hand, the Tdap vaccine is recommended between 27 and 32 weeks gestation to provide the best protection for the infant.

With flu season getting underway, and evidence of rising COVID-19 cases, right now would be a great time to get vaccinated against these viruses if you haven't already done so.