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Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and pregnancy (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 stands for "coronavirus disease 2019." It is caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2. The virus first appeared in late 2019 and quickly spread around the world.

People with COVID-19 can have fever, cough, trouble breathing, and other symptoms. Problems with breathing happen when the infection affects the lungs and causes pneumonia.

Most people who get COVID-19 will not get severely ill. But some do. In many areas, people have been told to stay home and away from other people. This is to try to slow the spread of the virus.

This article has information for people who are pregnant. More general information about COVID-19 is available separately. (See "Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) overview (The Basics).")

How is COVID-19 usually spread?

The virus that causes COVID-19 mainly spreads from person to person. This usually happens when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks near other people. Doctors also think it is possible to get sick if you touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. This is similar to how the flu spreads, but the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads more easily.

A person can be infected, and spread the virus to others, even without having any symptoms. This is why keeping people apart is one of the best ways to slow the spread.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms usually start 4 or 5 days after a person is infected with the virus. But in some people, it can take up to 2 weeks for symptoms to appear. Some people never show symptoms at all.

When symptoms do happen, they can include:

- Fever Cough Trouble breathing Feeling tired Shaking chills Muscle aches Headache Sore throat Problems with sense of smell or taste

Some people have digestive problems like nausea or diarrhea.

For most people, symptoms will get better within a few weeks. But in others, COVID-19 can lead to serious problems like pneumonia, not getting enough oxygen, heart problems, or even death. This is more common in people who are 65 years or older or have other health problems like heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, cancer, or obesity.

Are pregnant people at high risk for severe symptoms?

Experts do not yet know a lot about COVID-19 and pregnancy. But from what they know so far, pregnant people do not seem more likely than other people to get the infection. They also do not seem more likely to have a higher risk of serious problems (like pneumonia) than other people of similar age. Most people who get COVID-19 during pregnancy recover before having their baby.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

If you have a fever, cough, trouble breathing, or a combination of other COVID-19 symptoms, call your doctor, nurse, or midwife. They can tell you what to do and whether you need to be seen in person. They will also tell you if you should be tested for the virus that causes COVID-19.

If I am pregnant and get sick, can I pass the virus to my baby?

Experts do not yet know for sure. They think this is not likely to happen while the baby is still in the uterus (womb). But mothers with the infection can pass the virus to the baby after it is born.

Can COVID-19 cause problems with pregnancy?

From what experts know so far, most people who get COVID-19 during pregnancy will not have serious problems. But problems can happen if the mother becomes seriously ill.

Pregnant people who get COVID-19 might have an increased risk of preterm labor and birth. This is when the baby is born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. This seems to be more of a risk in people who get very sick and have pneumonia. Preterm birth can be dangerous, because babies who are born too early can have serious health problems.

How is COVID-19 treated?

There is no known specific treatment for COVID-19. Most people with mild illness will be able to stay home while they get better. Mild illness means you might have symptoms like fever and cough, but you do not have trouble breathing.

People with serious symptoms or other health problems might need to go to the hospital. If you need to be treated in the hospital, the doctors and nurses will also monitor your baby's health.

Doctors are studying several different treatments to learn whether they might work to treat COVID-19. In certain cases, doctors might recommend these treatments or being part of a clinical trial. A clinical trial is a scientific study that tests new medicines to see how well they work. But some medicines are not safe to take if you are pregnant.

Fever is a common symptom of COVID-19. If you are pregnant and get a fever, ask your doctor, nurse, or midwife what to do. Acetaminophen (sample brand name: Tylenol) can be used to treat a fever and is generally safe to take during pregnancy.

Can COVID-19 be prevented?

There is not yet a vaccine to prevent COVID-19. But there are things you can do to reduce your chances of getting it. In general, it's a good idea to be extra careful about hand washing and avoiding sick people when you are pregnant.

To help slow the spread of COVID-19:

- Practice "social distancing." This means keeping people, even those who are healthy, away from each other. It is also sometimes called "physical distancing." The goal is to slow the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. Avoiding large groups and events is an important part of social distancing. But even small gatherings can be risky, so it's best to stay home as much as you possibly can. When you do need to leave your home (for example, to get food or medicine or see your doctor), try your best to stay at least 6 feet (about 2 meters) away from other people. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommends covering your face when you need to leave your house. This is mostly so that if you are sick, even if you don't have any symptoms, you are less likely to spread the infection to other people. You can use cloth or a bandana to cover your mouth and nose. There are instructions online about how to make your own mask using fabric and rubber bands. Wash your hands with soap and water often. This is especially important after being out in public. Make sure to rub your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds, cleaning your wrists, fingernails, and in between your fingers. Then rinse your hands and dry them with a paper towel you can throw away. If you are not near a sink, you can use a hand sanitizing gel to clean your hands. The gels with at least 60 percent alcohol work the best. But it is better to wash with soap and water if you can. Avoid touching your face with your hands, especially your mouth, nose, or eyes. Avoid traveling if you can. Some experts recommend not traveling to or from certain areas where COVID-19 is spreading quickly. But any form of travel, especially if you spend time in crowded places like airports, increases your risk. If lots of people travel, it also makes it more likely that the virus will spread to more parts of the world.

Will my regular prenatal appointments change?

Your doctor, nurse, or midwife will work with you to make a plan for your visits during pregnancy. If you live in an area where COVID-19 is spreading quickly, there will likely be some changes. For example:

- Your partner might not be able to join you for appointments If you have any symptoms of COVID-19, you will probably need to wear a medical mask during your appointments Your doctor, nurse, or midwife might group certain tests together so you don't need to go in as often Your doctor, nurse, or midwife might suggest replacing some visits with a phone or video call

These changes can feel stressful. It can help to keep in mind that the goal is to help protect you and others.

What will my delivery be like?

You will be checked for fever and other symptoms of COVID-19 when you get to the hospital or birth center. This will happen earlier if you are scheduled to be "induced" or have a cesarean delivery ("c-section"). Depending on where you live and whether you have symptoms, you might be tested for the virus, too. Even if you feel healthy, you should cover your nose and mouth with cloth before going to the hospital. You can also expect to wear a mask during labor and delivery.

If you have COVID-19 when you go into labor, the doctors and nurses will take steps to protect others around you. For example, you will need to wear a medical mask if possible. You will probably still be able to have a vaginal birth, if that is what you planned. You don't need a c-section just because you are sick.

If you have COVID-19, you might not be able to hold your baby until you get better. If you do hold your baby, you will need to wear a face mask to lower the risk of spreading the infection. You might need to take other precautions, too. These things can be hard. But they are important in order to protect your baby.

If we are both healthy, can my partner be with me for the birth?

In areas where COVID-19 is spreading quickly, some hospitals have rules about who can be in the room during labor and delivery. Your doctor, nurse, or midwife can talk to you about what to expect. Your partner will not be allowed to be there if they have symptoms of COVID-19, have tested positive for the virus, or might have been exposed to someone who has it. If your partner cannot be with you, there is usually a way to have them support you over the phone or by video.

Some people wonder if it would be safer to give birth at home instead of at the hospital. If you are curious about this, talk to your doctor, nurse, or midwife. Home birth has risks, too.

What if I want to breastfeed?

Breastfeeding has many benefits for both you and your baby. It is not known if the virus that causes COVID-19 can be passed to a baby through breast milk.

If you are sick, you might want to have another healthy adult feed your baby. If that is not possible, it's important to be extra careful when feeding or holding your baby, whether or not you breastfeed. Even though experts do not know if the virus can be spread through breast milk, you could pass it to your baby through close contact. You can protect your baby by washing your hands often and wearing a face mask while you feed them.

You might choose to pump breast milk for your baby. If you are sick, wash your hands carefully before pumping, and wear a mask while you pump. If possible, have a healthy person clean your pump thoroughly between uses.

What can I do to cope with stress and anxiety?

It's normal to feel anxious or worried about COVID-19. If you are pregnant, you might feel sad about having to cancel celebrations and stay away from relatives and friends.

You can take care of yourself by trying to:

- Take breaks from the news Get regular exercise and eat healthy foods Try to find activities that you enjoy and can do in your home Stay in touch with your friends and family members

Keep in mind that most people do not get severely ill from COVID-19. It helps to be prepared, and it's important to do what you can to lower your risk and help slow the spread of the virus. But try not to panic.

What if I have other questions?

If you have other questions, talk to your doctor, nurse, or midwife. They can help you with questions like:

- What symptoms should I be concerned about? What should I do if I think I was exposed to COVID-19? What medicines can I use to treat symptoms of COVID-19 while I am pregnant? Where can I find support if I feel anxious or depressed?

The answers to these questions, and others, will depend on your situation.

Where can I go to learn more?

As we learn more about this virus, expert recommendations will continue to change. Check with your doctor or public health official to get the most updated information about how to protect yourself and your family.

For information about COVID-19 in your area, you can call your local public health office. In the United States, this usually means your city or town's Board of Health. Many states also have a "hotline" phone number you can call.

You can find more information about COVID-19 at the following websites:

- United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/COVID19 World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

More on this topic

- Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) overview (The Basics) Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and children (The Basics) Patient education: Avoiding infections in pregnancy (The Basics) Patient education: Acute respiratory distress syndrome (The Basics) Patient education: Pneumonia in adults (The Basics) Patient education: Prenatal care (The Basics) Patient education: Pumping breast milk (The Basics) Patient education: Preterm labor (The Basics)

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