

Immunisation to protect unborn babies

As peak flu season nears, pregnant Queenslanders are being strongly advised to get a free immunisation against influenza and whooping cough to protect their unborn babies.

Queensland Health figures show more than 10,409 people have already been diagnosed with the flu this year ^[1]. Of those, 848 required hospitalisations and 78 ended up in intensive care. In addition, new whooping cough cases have been confirmed in Queensland in recent weeks, with 71 new cases in Queensland over the last month ^[2].

AMA Queensland President Dr Dilip Dhupelia said pregnant women were more than twice as likely to be admitted to hospital with the flu than non-pregnant women.

“One of the best ways that pregnant women can protect their newborns from contracting the flu or whooping cough is to be immunised themselves,” Dr Dhupelia said.

It has such a positive impact on preventing significant illness in newborn babies, that the availability of vaccines for pregnant women has been made free under the National Immunisation Program.

“The good news is healthy pregnant women can now get vaccinated for whooping cough and the flu at the same time during pregnancy,” said Dr Dhupelia.

“Both vaccinations should be taken as a single dose during each pregnancy. Whilst the flu vaccination can be given at any time, it is important to know that the recommendation for whooping cough vaccination during pregnancy has changed and we are advising women to get vaccinated between 20 to 32 weeks gestation. “

“Maternal antibodies of fully vaccinated mums can protect newborns for the first few months of their lives, until they are old enough to have the vaccinations themselves,” Dr Dhupelia explained.

“The evidence is clear. Vaccination during pregnancy is estimated to reduce the risk of the flu in babies aged less than six months by about half; whilst vaccination during pregnancy for whooping cough has been shown to reduce the incidence in babies below three months by 91 per cent.”

Dr Dhupelia said newly born babies under six months of age were at greatest risk of severe disease or death from the flu or whooping cough.

“Do not underestimate these diseases. Both of these illnesses can lead to death, particularly in vulnerable young babies,” he said.

“Anyone who has seen a baby struggling to breathe whilst fighting the flu, or coughing incessantly with whooping cough knows just how frightening it can be.”

“Expectant mothers can take steps to give their newborn the best start in life by heeding to their doctor’s advice and getting immunized during pregnancy,” said Dr Dhupelia.

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^[1] https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0037/835588/influenza-qld-2019.pdf

^[2] <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/diseases-infection/surveillance/reports/notifiable/weekly>