

Podcast: Pregnancy and COVID-19

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My name is Ute Papkalla and I am a member of the health team of the German Institute for Medical Mission, also called Difäm. With me is my colleague, Carina Dinkel. Today we will talk about how Covid-19 affects a pregnancy, both the mother and the baby.

I just saw a pregnant woman waiting at an antenatal care visit recently, and she was very scared of being infected with the virus. She had many questions that I wanted to discuss with Carina:

- Is she as a pregnant woman more at risk of contracting Covid-19?
- If she is infected with Covid-19, is it more dangerous for her than for someone who is not pregnant?
- Can she pass on her infection with Covid-19 to her unborn baby?

These are all questions that come up if you are pregnant and a bit scared of the whole development of Covid-19.

Therefore, Carina, can you tell us more of these fears, and whether they are reasonable or not?

These are many questions and I can really understand that especially pregnant women are scared.

Let me just start with your first question: is a pregnant woman more at risk of contracting Covid-19? There is a very simple answer: NO!

A pregnant woman has the same chance as everyone else to be infected with the virus. Her chances are neither higher nor lower; it is just the same as for everybody else. You can tell the pregnant women out there that as long as they practice good hygiene: handwashing, mask wearing and physical distancing they are not more likely to be infected than anybody else.

Covid-19 is especially dangerous for the elderly and people with underlying health conditions, such as high blood pressure or diabetes. Luckily, most pregnant women are young and usually healthy, so they do not immediately fall into a high-risk group.

However, a Covid-19 infection can be more dangerous for women who are pregnant compared to women of the same age that are not pregnant, so if you are pregnant or treating pregnant patients you should be careful.

You just told me that my pregnant patient is not more likely to be infected with Covid-19, but that it is more dangerous for pregnant women. Could you please explain this to us more detailed?

Yes. It is a fact that pregnant women with Covid-19 get sicker and are at a higher risk of hospitalization. This has to do with the fact that Covid-19 is a respiratory virus. It might not be a surprise that respiratory viruses pose problems to pregnant women because their lungs are already working harder than usual. As the baby grows, the uterus pushes against the diaphragm, producing lung capacity and taxing an oxygen supply divided between mother and foetus. On top of that, pregnancy downs the immune system so as not to harm the baby. That makes women more susceptible to complications from infections; this, by the way, is not only true for Covid-19 but for other infections as well like e.g. influenza. It is also known that pregnant women show less symptoms when infected with Covid-19 due to the dialled-down immune system. This is important because it means that health staff should be more careful and make sure to really protect themselves when they work with pregnant women, even if they seem healthy. They should also inform the pregnant woman during the antenatal care visit.

Okay, I now understand why pregnant women have higher chances of becoming seriously ill from Covid-19. So far, we have focused on the mothers but what about the unborn baby how dangerous is COVID-19 for the foetus?

Reassuringly, Covid-19 has so far not been linked to a clear increase in rates of stillbirth or stalled foetal growth.

What is certain though is that pregnant women with a Covid-19 infection had three times the odds of delivering preterm that means they delivered their babies before reaching 37 weeks. Preterm delivery brings with it a lot more risks to the new-born, but also the mother. This is another reason to be especially careful to not become infected with Covid-19 when pregnant.

And what can happen during birth and after the baby is born? Should the mother be separated from the new-born to not transmit the virus after birth?

First, although it seems really hard, **the woman should wear a mask while giving birth**. This might be difficult and tiresome for the woman, but under birth the heavy breathing greatly increases the possible risks of transmissions.

Babies are mostly spared a severe respiratory infection and do not often get sick. We so far know that even if the mother is positive most babies were healthy at birth and for the following weeks, they did not show signs of a Covid-19 infection.

Therefore, even if a mother is diagnosed with Covid-19 and has just given birth, she should stay close to her infant. Body contact is important, exclusive breastfeeding is essential because the mother will also pass on antibodies she has developed against Covid-19 from

her own infection through the breast milk, and so the baby will be protected. This means that breastfeeding can help protect the newborn against Covid-19.

Thank you for sharing this information. The pregnant woman I told you about before was worried that she might not be able to see her baby if she was positive with COVID-19. It is good to know that we can tell our patients that this is not the case. I am also relieved to hear that an infection might not be as harmful to a baby as many pregnant women fear.

Yes, that is right. However, the WHO advises mothers that do show symptoms of Covid-19 to wear a medical mask during contact with the baby and to always wash their hands before and after touching the baby and before or after touching the breasts.

To sum up what you explained to us, we can tell our pregnant patients that they need to be careful. They have no higher risk of contracting Covid-19, but an infection could lead to a more severe reaction. Therefore, a pregnant woman should do everything possible to avoid an infection, and practise good hygiene to stay safe.

Yes, that is correct. Please always take your time in explaining this to a pregnant woman and her family, and that there is no need to be overly worried if they are careful.

Okay, this means that also family and friends should be especially careful not to pass on the virus to her. This should help to protect her and the baby. What kind of advice would you give health professionals currently working with pregnant women?

When working with pregnant women you should act with more caution than usual.

Pregnant women and their newborns, including those with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 infections have the right to high quality care before, during and after childbirth just like every other woman. In addition, you as a practitioner should make sure that you stay safe.

I already told you about the dialled-down immune system of pregnant women which means that women with Covid-19 are less likely to show symptoms. They might not be running a fever, they might not be coughing but they can still be infected. It is therefore important to protect yourself and your fellow staff members by using appropriate PPE even if your patients seem to be in good health.

Thank you very much, Carina, for this advice. I now have another question that rather concerns the indirect effects of the Covid pandemic on behalf of pregnant women and their babies. Could there be an indirect effect?

Yes, there could be indirect effects and we fear that they might appear: we fear that maternal mortality might rise, that also neonatal mortality might rise because women do not dare to show up in antenatal care clinics. So please make sure that even while the pandemic is raging the antenatal care clinics are held up and keep their regular schedules and encourage women to show up for their antenatal care.

Thank you very much, Carina, for sharing this with us and I hope we can put this knowledge to good use. Let us work together to keep pregnant women safe and limit the spreading of the virus.

And make sure that you wash your hands, keep your distance and wear your masks even more if you are working with pregnant women.

Therefore, what is left for us to say is be blessed and stay safe!

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