

Guidance for pregnant women and their families¹

Version 1.0 dated 21st March 2020

Coronavirus infection and pregnancy

The following advice from the Maltese Public Health Authorities is a combination of available evidence, good practice and expert advice. The priorities are (i) the reduction of transmission of COVID-19 to pregnant women and (ii) the provision of safe care to women with suspected / confirmed COVID-19. Please be aware that this is very much an evolving situation and this guidance is a living document that may be updated if or when new information becomes available.

What effect does coronavirus have on pregnant women?

Generally, pregnant women **do not** appear to be more severely unwell than the general population if they develop coronavirus. As this is a new virus, it is not exactly clear how it may affect pregnant women. It is expected the large majority of pregnant women will experience only mild or moderate cold/flu like symptoms. More severe symptoms such as pneumonia appear to be more common in older people, those with weakened immune systems or long-term conditions.

If you are pregnant you are more vulnerable to getting infections than a woman who is not pregnant. If you have an underlying condition, such as asthma or diabetes, you may be more unwell if you have coronavirus. If you live with or frequently visit a relative over 60 years of age, you can also be a carrier for that person, putting him/her at risk of infection.

What effect will coronavirus have on the baby if a pregnant woman is diagnosed with the infection?

This is a very new virus and we are just beginning to learn about it. There is no evidence to suggest an increased risk of miscarriage. There is also no evidence that the virus can pass to your developing baby while you are pregnant. In two reported cases of possible vertical transmission, it seems that transmission occurred due to contact soon after birth. Another recent report² from China of four women with coronavirus infection when they gave birth found **no evidence** of the infection in their newborn babies. Expert opinion is that the foetus is unlikely to be exposed during pregnancy. It is also therefore considered unlikely

that if you have the virus it would cause abnormalities in your baby and, to date, none have been observed.

What do you do to reduce the risk of catching coronavirus?

- The most important thing is to **wash your hands** with soap and water for at least 20 seconds regularly and effectively. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, then throw the tissue in the trash and wash your hands.

Why are pregnant women more vulnerable?

Pregnant women have been identified as a vulnerable group. This means pregnant women are advised to reduce social contact through social distancing measures. This decision is driven by the desire to be very cautious about pregnant women. We know that some viral infections are worse in pregnant women. At the moment, there's no evidence that this is the case for coronavirus infection, but the amount of evidence with COVID-19 is still quite limited.

All pregnant women should follow strictly the guidance on social distancing for vulnerable people. **Social distancing** measures are steps you can take to reduce social interaction between people, decrease your risk of infection and help reduce the transmission of COVID-19 viruses in our community. Pregnant women are advised to:

- Avoid contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of COVID-19. These symptoms include **cough, fever and shortness of breath**.
- **Fever** from any cause should be treated since high temperature is not beneficial for the baby and contact with your healthcare professional is recommended.
- Avoid non-essential travel when possible
- Work from home, where possible.
- Avoid all gatherings in public spaces, noting that pubs, restaurants, leisure centres and similar venues are currently shut as infections spread easily in closed spaces where people gather together.

- Avoid all gatherings with friends and family. Keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media
- Use telephone or online services to do your shopping, to contact your GP or for other essential services

Can pregnant women still go to work?

Pregnant women who can work from home should do so. If they cannot work from home, especially if their work involves close contact with the public, work practices should be modified appropriately to minimise exposure. Employers are strongly advised to consider favourably any requests to minimise exposure by pregnant women.

Should pregnant women attend antenatal appointments?

If you are well, you should attend your antenatal care as normal.

If you miss an appointment and haven't heard from your care team, please contact them to rearrange the appointment.

If you have any concerns, you will still be able to contact your care team but please note they may take longer to get back to you

You will be asked to keep the number of people with you at appointments to a minimum, and it would be appropriate to avoid taking your children with you.

What are the symptoms of coronavirus infection?

Symptoms of coronavirus infection may include one or more of the following:

- Cough
- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia with severe acute respiratory distress.

If you develop these symptoms, stay at home, contact your doctor and contact the Public Health team on **(+356) 111 or 21 324086** for advice and guidance.

How will I be tested for coronavirus?

If you do require a test, you will be tested in the same way as anyone being tested, regardless of the fact that you are pregnant. Currently, the test involves swabs being taken from your nose.

What happens if I test positive for coronavirus?

If you test positive for coronavirus, and you have no symptoms, or mild symptoms, you may be advised to recover at home. If you have more severe symptoms, you might be treated in a hospital setting.

Hospital Care

If you are diagnosed with a coronavirus infection, and you are being treated in hospital, your care team will be **alerted** so that you can be offered holistic care that considers your specific care needs.

Home Care

If you are diagnosed with a coronavirus infection, and you are being treated at your home, you should contact your obstetric care team to inform them that you have been placed in quarantine for COVID-19 infection, particularly if you have any routine appointments in the next 14 days. If you have concerns about the wellbeing of yourself or your unborn baby during your quarantine period, contact your obstetric care team. They will provide further advice, including whether you need to attend hospital.

If you are placed on obligatory quarantine because you have been in contact with a person diagnosed with a coronavirus infection, you should contact your obstetric care team to inform them that you have been placed in quarantine, particularly if you have any routine appointments in the next 14 days. If you have concerns about the wellbeing of yourself or your unborn baby during your quarantine period, contact your obstetric care team. They will provide further advice, including whether you need to attend hospital.

What should I do if I am asked to quarantine?

Pregnant women who have been advised to quarantine for possible/confirmed coronavirus should **stay indoors** and avoid contact with others (including their own children) for 14 days, to avoid spreading the infection outside the home. They should stay at home and not allow visitors. They are to ventilate the rooms where they are by opening a window. They are to separate themselves from other members of their household as far as possible, using their own towels, crockery and utensils and eating at different times. They should use friends, family or delivery services to run errands, and advise them to leave items outside their door. You may wish to consider online fitness routines to keep active.

Can I still attend my antenatal appointments if I am in quarantine?

You should **contact the antenatal clinic** to inform them that you are currently in quarantine for possible/confirmed coronavirus and request advice on attending routine antenatal appointments.

Routine antenatal appointments may be delayed until quarantine ends. If your doctor or midwife advises that your appointment cannot wait, the necessary arrangements will be made for you to be seen. For example, you may be asked to attend at a different time, or in a different clinic, to protect other patients.

How will my care be managed after I have recovered from coronavirus?

If you have confirmed coronavirus infection, the antenatal care will be individualised according to the number of weeks of the pregnancy and the symptoms you may have.

If you have recovered from coronavirus and tested negative for the virus before you go into labour, where and how you give birth will not be affected by your previous illness.

What do I do if I feel unwell or I'm worried about my baby during quarantine?

If you have concerns about the wellbeing of yourself or your unborn baby during your quarantine period, contact your caring team or the **Antenatal Clinic (+356 25454440)** or the **Delivery Suite (+356 25455170)**. They will provide further advice, including whether you need to attend hospital / clinic.

If attendance at the maternity unit or clinic is advised, pregnant women in quarantine will be requested to travel by private transport, or arrange hospital transport, and alert the reception once on the premises, prior to entering the hospital / clinic.

Will being in quarantine for suspected or confirmed coronavirus affect where I give birth?

As a precautionary approach, pregnant women with suspected or confirmed coronavirus when they go into labour, are being advised to attend a **designated obstetric unit** for birth, where the baby can be monitored using continuous electronic foetal surveillance, and the mother's oxygen levels can be monitored.

The continuous foetal monitoring is to check how your baby is coping with labour. As continuous foetal monitoring can only take place in an obstetric unit, where doctors and midwives are present, it is not recommended that you give birth at home.

Will being in quarantine for suspected or confirmed coronavirus affect how I give birth?

There is currently no evidence to suggest you cannot give birth **vaginally** or that you would be safer having a caesarean section if you have suspected or confirmed coronavirus. However, if your respiratory condition (breathing) suggests that urgent delivery is needed, a caesarean birth may be recommended.

Pain management will be tailored to the individual, the progress of labour and the mode of delivery. During caesarean sections, spinal or epidural analgesia is preferable to general anaesthesia.

What happens if I go into labour during my quarantine period?

If you go into labour, you should call the **Delivery Suite (+356 25455170)** for advice and inform them that you have suspected or confirmed coronavirus infection. A cordoned-off area has been designated in the Delivery Suite specifically for quarantine cases and separately for Covid-19 positive cases. Care for all three scenarios, non-infected, quarantine and Covid-19 positive will be **the same**. The only difference is that the doctors and midwives will have more protective clothing in cases of quarantine and Covid-19 positive mothers.

If you become significantly unwell due to infection with coronavirus, it may occasionally be necessary to deliver your baby early to help you to recover. In this situation, the baby may need to be delivered prematurely.

If you have mild symptoms, you will be encouraged to remain at home (self-isolating) in early labour, as per standard practice. Your maternity team have been advised on ways to ensure that you and your baby receive safe, quality care, respecting your birth plan as closely as possible. Your partner will be able to stay with you throughout, but no other visitors will be allowed, not even in the waiting room.

Could I pass coronavirus to my baby?

As this is a new virus, there is limited evidence about managing women with coronavirus infection in women who have just given birth; however, there are **no confirmed reports** of women diagnosed with coronavirus during the third trimester of pregnancy having passed the virus to their babies while in the womb.

Will my baby be tested for coronavirus?

Yes, if you have suspected or confirmed coronavirus at the time your baby is born, your baby will be tested for coronavirus.

Will I be able to stay with my baby if I have suspected or confirmed coronavirus?

A discussion about the risks and benefits should take place between you and your family and the obstetric team and the paediatrician to individualise care for your baby.

Will I be able to breastfeed my baby if I have suspected or confirmed coronavirus?

A discussion about the risks and benefits should take place between you and your family and the obstetric team and the paediatrician to individualise care for your baby.

What is the advice if I am a healthcare worker and pregnant?

We understand that it must be an anxious time if you work in healthcare and you are pregnant. We advise pregnant women to minimise social contact as a precautionary measure. To the best of available knowledge, most pregnant healthcare professionals are no more personally susceptible to catching the virus than their non-pregnant colleagues. If you become unwell due to infection with coronavirus, it may occasionally be necessary to deliver your baby early to help you to recover. In this situation, the baby may need to be delivered prematurely.

Key Messages

1. The majority of Covid-19 pregnant women have mild symptoms.
2. Currently there is no evidence that Covid-19 pregnant women transmitted the infection to their newborn babies during pregnancy.
3. Washing of hands and Social distancing are the two most effective preventive measures against Covid-19 infection.
4. Symptoms of Coronavirus include cough, fever and shortness of breath.
5. Contact the Public Health team on (+356) 111 or 21 324086 if you develop these symptoms.

6. If you are Covid-19 positive or in quarantine you should contact the antenatal healthcare personnel in the Antenatal Outpatients (+356 25454440) or Central Delivery Suite (+356 25455170).
7. Although placed in separate delivery rooms the standard of care during labour whether you are in quarantine, Covid-19 positive or not infected will be the same.

REFERENCES

- 1) Adapted from Coronavirus (COVID-19) infection and pregnancy – guidance for healthcare professionals: Version 3 - 18 March 2020 published by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Royal College of Midwives and Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, with input from the Royal College of Anaesthetists, Public Health England and Health Protection Scotland.
- 2) Frontiers in Paediatrics - Infants Born to Mothers With a New Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Front. Pediatr., 16 March 2020 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fped.2020.00104>
- 3) Coronavirus (COVID-19) infection and pregnancy – guidance for healthcare professionals: Version 3 - 18 March 2020 – RCOG – see Page 22
- 4) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html>