COVID-19 and Pregnancy, Birth, Postpartum, and Breastfeeding: Information for Expectant and New Parents

Information is continually being reviewed and updated. The information below may change as our knowledge of COVID-19 evolves.

Having a baby is a joyful, momentous time in your life. COVID-19 doesn't change that, but it may have changed your plans, your ability to connect with family and friends, and your experience of pregnancy and first few months with your baby. Pay attention to your feelings and talk to your partner or someone you trust about them. To learn more about what you can do for yourself in tough times like these and where to get help, visit ahs.ca/helpintoughtimes

Click to be taken directly to a question:

Protecting myself and my family

1. Where can I find trusted, up-to-date information on COVID-19?

2. **UPDATED** Where can I find information about the vaccine for COVID-19?

3. **UPDATED** I am an expectant or new parent, is there anything I can do to avoid getting infected with COVID-19?

4. I am an expectant or new parent, should I wear a non-medical mask to avoid being infected with COVID-19?

5. **UPDATED** I am an expectant or new parent, how can I protect myself and baby if any of my household members are symptomatic, in isolation or tested positive for COVID-19?

6. Will my physician know if I'm being tested for COVID-19 or have a positive test result?

Pregnancy (prenatal)

7. **UPDATED** I am pregnant and I am worried about getting infected with COVID-19. How will COVID-19 affect me and my baby?

8. If I think I already have the COVID-19 infection, what should I do?

9. I'm pregnant and feeling healthy. Should I still go to my prenatal appointments?

Labour and birth

10. **UPDATED** Can my support person still be with me during labour and birth in the hospital? Can my family and friends visit me and my baby at the hospital?

11. What will happen when I am in labour during the COVID-19 pandemic?

12. Do I need to wear a mask during labour at an AHS facility?

Postpartum

13. Do I need to wear a mask on the Postpartum Unit? Does my support person need to wear a mask on the Postpartum Unit?

14. **UPDATED** What will happen when I am discharged from the hospital?

Alberta Health Services | Canada's Top 100 Employers 2018

Protecting myself and my family

1. Where can I find trusted, up-to-date information on COVID-19?

Visit ahs.ca/covid or alberta.ca/covid for trusted, Alberta-specific information about COVID-19, including the new variants. Frequently asked questions for the public can be found here.

In addition, a podcast featuring Dr. Colin Birch, Department Head of Obstetrics and Gynecology for Calgary Zone, with questions about the impact of COVID-19 on expectant mothers and families of newborns is available at ahs.ca/covidpodcast

2. UPDATED Where can I find information about the vaccine for COVID-19?

Learn more about the vaccine and immunization program at: ahs.ca/covidvaccine

COVID-19 vaccine is recommended for everyone 12 years of age and older, including people who are trying to get pregnant now or might become pregnant in the future, and their partners.

It is best to get an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine if you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant. Research to date shows that it is the safest type of COVID-19 vaccine to get during pregnancy.

If you get pregnant after receiving your first shot of COVID-19 vaccine, make sure to get your second shot to get as much protection as possible.

COVID-19 immunization is also safe if you are breastfeeding and expressing breastmilk for your baby.

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding and have questions about the vaccine you can talk to your health

care provider, but this is not required before being immunized.

Learn more about vaccine in pregnancy here.

3. UPDATED I am an expectant or new parent. Is there anything I can do to avoid getting infected with COVID-19?

It is always important for expectant parents, new parents, and breastfeeding families to protect themselves from illness and to take steps to avoid and prevent any infection. Learn more at HealthyParentsHealthyChildren.ca.

While several treatments are currently being investigated, there is currently no specific treatment for COVID-19. Preventing COVID-19 is your best protection. The best way to protect yourself is to get immunized, follow public health guidance, and assess and manage your personal risk. Following these steps can help reduce your risk of COVID-19 infection or spreading to others:

Proper hygiene:

- Stay home and away from others if you are sick.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer if your hands are not visibly dirty and if soap and water are not available.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow, not into your hand. Dispose of tissues as soon as possible and wash your hands afterward.
- Avoid touching your eyes, face, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched frequently (e.g., door handles, phones, television remotes, toilets, bedside tables).

Physical distancing (taking steps to limit the number of people you or your baby come into close contact with):

- Keep a distance of at least 2 metres (6 feet) from others. This includes, for example, when you go for walks in your neighbourhood or park, in your workplace, when you go out for groceries or medical trips, etc.
- Limit the number of times you leave your home for errands. Consider ordering online or having items delivered, if possible, and maintain 2 metres distance from others.
- If you need to go out for groceries, medical trips, or other essential needs, try to go out at less busy times.
- Work from home, if possible.
- Follow Alberta's recommendations on gatherings.
- Avoid overcrowding in places like elevators – limit to 2-3 people.
- Stay in virtual contact with family and friends. If you are feeling isolated, reach out.
- Avoid close contact with people who have COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sore throat or runny nose) or are sick with other cold or flu-like symptoms.

To learn more about how to help prevent the spread, see alberta.ca/prevent-the-spread

4. I am an expectant or new parent. Should I wear a non-medical mask to avoid being infected with COVID-19?

Wearing a mask is required in most settings as part of public health measures. Visit alberta.ca/covid for the most up-to-date guidelines.

Wearing a non-medical mask, such as a homemade cloth mask, has not been proven to protect the person wearing it and is not a substitute for handwashing and physical distancing. However, wearing a non-medical mask may be helpful in protecting others around you. This is because face coverings are another way to cover your mouth and nose to prevent respiratory droplets from contaminating other people or surfaces. Additionally, wearing a mask may stop you from touching your nose and mouth.

If you have COVID-19 or are feeling unwell, wear a mask while providing direct care to your infant. When not providing direct care, keep your baby at least 2 metres (6 feet) away from you and from anyone who is sick, may have COVID-19, or who has a respiratory illness.

If you choose to wear a non-medical mask or face covering due to illness, there are steps that you must follow to ensure that you are using it correctly.

If you are using a face mask:

- Ensure that it fits well and does not gape at the sides. Wash your hands with soap and water before putting on the mask **and** after removing the mask.
- Do not touch the mask while using it. If you accidentally touch the mask while you are using it, wash your hands.
- Replace the mask if it gets damp or dirty.
- Do not reuse single-use masks.
- Do not share masks with others.
- Used masks must be carefully handled to avoid spreading infection to others.
- It may be helpful to carry a bag with a clean mask in it, as well as a plastic bag that can be used to safely store used masks until they can be washed at home (if using cloth masks) or thrown away (if using disposal masks). Wash reusable cloth masks after each use to avoid infection. They can be laundered with other items using a hot cycle and then dried thoroughly.

Learn more about masks at ahs.ca/covid

5. UPDATED I am an expectant or new parent. How can I protect myself and baby if any of my household members are symptomatic, in isolation or tested positive for COVID-19?

The best way to protect yourself is to get immunized, follow public health guidance, and assess and manage your personal risk. You can help protect yourself and your baby by:

- Follow all proper hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and social/physical distancing recommendations.
- If at all possible, try to ensure that the ill person has a designated bedroom and bathroom.
- Do not allow the ill person to prepare meals for others, and ensure that they use separate preparation area or at least prepare meals at a different time, washing all surfaces after.
- Avoid sharing household items like dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels and pillows.
- Monitor yourself for symptoms and call Health Link at 811 for assessment and advice if you have symptoms yourself.
- If you are caring for a person who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, follow this advice to protect yourself and others in the home, as well as those in your community.

6. Will my physician know if I'm being tested for COVID-19 or have a positive test result?

If you are being tested for COVID-19 during your pregnancy or after the birth of your baby at an AHS facility or assessment centre, the nurse will ask you to provide the name of your physician. Your physician's name will be added to the lab requisition to ensure a copy of your results are sent to them – they will also need your physician's office address.

You are also asked to contact your physician or specialist if you test positive for COVID-19. If you are being tested for COVID-19 by your physician, they will receive the lab results directly.

For more information for people tested for COVID-19 visit tested and next steps.

For more information on how to safely care for your baby if you are experiencing symptoms, have COVID-19, or need to quarantine, see *Postpartum*, *Feeding my baby* and *Caring for my baby* sections below.

Pregnancy (prenatal)

7. UPDATED I am pregnant and I am worried about getting infected with COVID-19. How will COVID-19 affect me and my baby?

There is currently no evidence to suggest that being pregnant increases your risk of getting COVID-19. People who are pregnant are currently considered to have the same risk of getting COVID-19 as other adults.

Receiving a COVID-19 vaccine during pregnancy reduces the risk for infection. Immunization allows immunity to be passed from mother to infant, helping to protect your baby for the first few months of life.

If you have tested positive for COVID-19 just prior to delivery, there is a very low risk of the COVID-19 virus being transmitted to your baby during pregnancy or delivery. Based on current understanding, it is a very rare event. Your health care team will take steps to reduce the risk of transmission during labour and delivery. There is currently no evidence that the COVID-19 virus is transmitted to your baby through breastmilk.

Although serious complications related to COVID-19 are not common for pregnant women, they are *more* common than in non-pregnant women. Evidence suggests that pregnant women with COVID-19 are at greater risk of being hospitalized and having severe outcomes compared to non-pregnant women of a similar age with COVID-19. COVID-19 is associated with an increased frequency of preterm births. The best way to protect yourself is to get immunized, follow public health guidance, and assess and manage your personal risk.

Talk to your health care provider if you are worried about COVID-19, if you have questions about COVID-19 symptoms, or if you have questions about your COVID-19 test results.

8. If I think I already have the COVID-19 infection, what should I do?

If you aren't feeling well, complete the COVID 19 online screening tool that is available at ahs.ca/covid.

Notify your health care provider of your concerns, as they may need to make different arrangements for your clinic appointments and prenatal care.

If you are currently in quarantine due to travel or as a close contact (if you have been exposed to COVID-19 through a household contact and you are not fully immunized), or isolating because of symptoms or a positive COVID-19 test and if your symptoms change or worsen, do not delay accessing healthcare. Call Heath Link at 811 if you have questions regarding your or your baby's health or call 911 if your symptoms are severe.

9. I'm pregnant and feeling healthy. Should I still go to my prenatal appointments?

Clinics and offices may have different procedures and policies at this time to reduce risks of COVID-19. Talk to your physician or midwife about your upcoming prenatal appointments. If you are worried about leaving your home to attend an appointment, talk to your health care provider.

Labour and birth

10. UPDATED Can my support person still be with me during labour and birth in the hospital? Can my family and friends visit me and my baby at the hospital?

We recognize family centred care is important. To keep patients and staff healthy and safe, there may be some restrictions on family/designated support and visitation access at sites. Learn more at ahs.ca/visitation. Check the link close to your due date as these guidelines are subject to change.

Let the health care provider know when you arrive at the hospital for labour and delivery if there is a person with COVID-19 or with COVID-19 symptoms in your household.

See the COVID-19 Screening Questionnaire for more information about your support persons – and note the special exemption for support persons for maternity patients at the bottom of the questionnaire. Support persons for maternity patients must not have any COVID-19 symptoms and cannot have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 10 days.

Your support person is required to wear a mask at all times. Learn more by reviewing the Know Your Risk and Know Your Role brochures for designated support persons.

If you are choosing to give birth in the community, talk to your health care provider about guidance for your support person.

11. What will happen when I am in labour during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We recognize how important your birth plan is for you and your family. To ensure safety for you, your baby and your health care providers, changes may be made to the location and care depending on your COVID-19 Screening Questionnaire results or development of symptoms.

The hospital is a safe place to give birth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Your health care providers, hospital staff, and support person (see #10) will wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and follow infection prevention procedures. When you arrive at the hospital, you (and your support person, see #10) will be asked to complete a COVID-19 Screening Questionnaire.

In the home environment, your health care provider (e.g., midwife) will also ensure COVID-19 screening and appropriate PPE and infection prevention procedures are followed, including any requirements for your support person.

If you are in isolation at the time of labour and delivery (i.e., you have tested positive for COVID-19 or have symptoms of COVID-19), your health care provider will recommend that labour and delivery occur in a hospital.

If you are in quarantine at the time of labour and delivery (i.e., if you have been exposed to COVID-19 through a household contact and you are not fully immunized), labour and delivery can occur at your hospital or in your home as previously planned with your health care provider.

12. Do I need to wear a mask during labour at an AHS facility?

The wearing of masks by any pregnant woman during labour is not mandated within AHS facilities.

You will be asked to wear a mask upon entrance to the site. You can then remove the mask within your bedspace/care space.

Some women are choosing to wear masks in early labour, but this is not mandatory. However, masks must be worn outside the bedspace/care space.

Your support person is required to wear a mask at all times. For information about your support person during labour, see #10.

Postpartum

13. Do I need to wear a mask on the Postpartum Unit? Does my support person need to wear a mask on the Postpartum Unit?

In the Postpartum Unit, you will be asked to wear a mask at all times unless you are in a private room. You will be expected to wear a mask if you leave your private room.

Like in the Labour & Delivery Unit, while in the Postpartum Unit, your designated support person will be expected to wear a mask at all times.

14. UPDATED What will happen when I am discharged from the hospital?

You and your baby will be discharged as soon as possible from the hospital. A public health nurse or your midwife will be in contact to check on you and discuss the need for further follow up.

A public health nurse or your midwife will continue your postpartum care in the community. Your physician and your baby's physician will continue to provide care, however, this might look different depending on where you live.

You should continue to practice good hand hygiene and physical distancing. Continue to practice isolation or quarantine recommendations as appropriate to your situation once you are discharged.

If you are discharged from a unit that has had a COVID-19 outbreak, your health care team will provide you with additional quarantine recommendations or COVID-19 testing instructions when you are discharged.

15. If I am experiencing symptoms, have been tested positive for COVID-19, or need to isolate, can I still have skin-to-skin contact with my baby after delivery?

Yes, you can. Your health care provider will show you how to wash your hands and chest – wash your chest if you have been sneezing, coughing or if it has been exposed to droplets from your nose/mouth from talking loudly or singing, and wear a mask to protect your baby. You can continue this practice to keep your baby safe until all of your symptoms have resolved or 10 days has passed since the start of symptoms. For more information on how to wash your chest, see #18 below.

If you plan to breastfeed, you will also be encouraged to breastfeed during your first skin-to-skin cuddle after delivery.

Feeding my baby

General feeding information

16. How can I feed my baby safely during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Like many other respiratory illnesses, the transmission of the COVID-19 virus occurs through person to person spread by larger droplets, like from a cough or sneeze, or touching contaminated objects of surfaces, then touching your eyes, face, nose or mouth.

Continue to practice good hygiene during feeding to help protect your baby from getting the infection:

- Always wash your hands before and after touching your baby.

- If wearing a mask, wash your hands before putting your mask on and after removing your mask.
- Avoid coughing or sneezing on your baby while feeding your baby.
- Wash your hands before touching breast pumps, bottles, and other feeding equipment.
- Clean the equipment thoroughly after each use.
- Clean high-touch surfaces like door handles and change pads often with a recommended cleaner – list of hard surface disinfectants.

If you have been tested positive for COVID-19, are isolating, or are feeling unwell, see the *breastfeeding* and *feeding by bottle* sections below for more information.

17. UPDATED Should I wear a mask while feeding my baby?

If you have tested positive for COVID-19 or are feeling unwell, wear a face mask while feeding your baby and while handling expressed breastmilk, formula, and feeding equipment.

If you are using a face mask while feeding:

- Ensure that it fits well and does not gape at the sides.
- Wash your hands with soap and water, or use an alcohol based hand sanitizer, before putting on the mask and after removing the mask.
- Do not touch the mask while using it. If you accidentally touch the mask while you are using it, wash your hands.
- Replace the mask if it gets damp or dirty.
- Do not reuse single-use masks.
- Do not share masks with others.

If you do not have a face mask, alternatives can reduce some droplets from coughing or sneezing. Wrap a two-layer cloth like a scarf or bandana around your nose and mouth while feeding your baby. If you are using an alternative mask, wash your hands before covering your nose and mouth, do not touch the covering, and use it when feeding or caring for your baby. Wash your hands if you have touched your mask and after you remove it. Cloth masks should be worn only a short time before being replaced or washed. Replace the alternative mask if it gets wet and wash it thoroughly after each use.

Learn more about masks at ahs.ca/covid

Breastfeeding

18. UPDATED If I have COVID-19 and still need to isolate, will I still be able to breastfeed and express breastmilk for my baby?

Based on current evidence, COVID-19 is not transmitted through breastmilk. The benefits of breastfeeding contribute to the overall health of your baby. Breastfeeding and expressing breastmilk for your baby continue to be recommended. COVID-19 immunization is also safe if you are breastfeeding and expressing breastmilk for your baby.

Continue to practice good hygiene (see above) to help protect your baby. In addition:

- Wash your chest with soap and water before breastfeeding if you have been sneezing, coughing or if it has been exposed to droplets from your nose/mouth from talking loudly or singing.
- Clean your chest area with water and a mild unscented soap, then rinse twice with clear water to remove the soap residue. This can be done in the shower or wiping with a clean wet soft cloth.
  - Put some of your expressed breastmilk on your nipples and areolas before and after feeding to keep them healthy and prevent them from drying. There is no need to use a disinfectant or antibacterial soap.
- Wear a face mask while feeding your baby and while handling expressed breastmilk and feeding equipment.
- Consider putting a scarf or blanket over your shoulder to cover your baby while you feed.

You can continue this practice to keep your baby safe until all of your symptoms have resolved or 10 days has passed since the start of symptoms, whichever is longer.

Feeding by bottle

19. If I have COVID-19, will I still be able to feed my baby by bottle?

If you are feeding by bottle, continue to practice good hygiene and clean feeding equipment regularly (see above) to help protect your baby.

Wear a face mask while feeding your baby and while handling expressed breastmilk, formula, and feeding equipment. Consider putting a scarf or blanket over your shoulder to cover your baby while you feed.

If you have a support person who is feeling well, consider having them prepare the bottle and feed your baby. Your support person should continue to practice good hygiene to help protect your baby.

20. Is there anything I need to know if I usually feed my baby formula?

If you are using infant formula to feed your baby:

- Purchase a reasonable amount of formula (e.g., a 2-week supply).
- If you need to temporarily switch to a different type of formula, it may take about 2 weeks for your baby's system to adapt. You might notice that your baby's stool looks different or that they pass stool more or less often. If you have any concerns, like constipation, talk with your health care provider.
- If you are purchasing infant formula online, only order a Canadian brand of formula. For more information, visit HealthyParentsHealthyChildren.ca.
- Do not give homemade formula. Homemade formula does not offer proper nutrition and can make your baby very sick.

If you have difficulty accessing infant formula, contact Alberta 211 for community resources, social services, and financial supports.

Caring for my baby

21. UPDATED If I have COVID-19, will I still be able to care for my baby?

It is okay to care for your baby. However, when not providing direct care, keep your baby at least 2 metres (6 feet) away from anyone who is sick, may have COVID-19, or who has a respiratory illness. If you have COVID-19 or are feeling unwell, wash your hands before providing direct care and wear a mask while providing direct care (see above).

The same steps that you were taking to reduce the risk of getting or spreading COVID-19 while you were pregnant (get immunized, follow public health guidance, and assess and manage your personal risk) will reduce the risk of your baby getting COVID-19.

22. If my COVID-19 swab is positive, will my baby have the illness too?

If you tested positive, then your baby will also be tested for COVID-19 before discharge from the hospital. If your baby's swab is negative, they will not need further testing, unless they develop symptoms.

If your baby's first swab is positive, your health care provider will arrange to have another test completed. If the second swab is negative, a third swab will be collected to confirm results.

23. What are some signs that my baby may be unwell?

If your baby seems unwell and develops any of the signs or symptoms listed below, seek help.

Go to the Emergency Department **NOW** if your baby is **under 3 months** and has an underarm temperature that is lower than 36.5 °C (97.8 °F) or higher than 37.5 °C (99.5 °F).

Call 911 **NOW** if your baby has any of the following:
- is breathing slowly or has stopped breathing
- is having trouble breathing or is wheezing
- has flared nostrils
- is grunting
- has blue or grey skin
- is limp or not moving
- if you're having trouble waking up your baby

Call Health Link at 811 or your health care provider if your baby has any of the following:

- has a high or low temperature (higher than 37.5 °C or lower than 36.5 °C)
- is breathing faster than usual
- has a cough
- is vomiting

- has diarrhea
- is more sleepy than usual
- is not feeding well

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's health at any time, call Health Link at 811 or talk with your health care provider.

24. Where can I find more information about pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, postpartum supports, and caring for my new baby?

In person prenatal classes have been suspended to protect Albertans and prevent the spread of COVID-19. To find out more about how individual classes are affected contact your local community or public health centre. Some classes may be offered as live, virtual classes. A self-directed, online prenatal class option is available - online Birth and Babies course. You can also refer to Alberta Health Services' pregnancy and parenting resource HealthyParentsHealthyChildren.ca for information on pregnancy, breastfeeding, and the early years.

If you are pregnant or caring for a newborn, take care of yourself. Take breaks from watching or listening to COVID-19 information. Connect virtually with others in similar situations and talk about how you are feeling. Know that you are not alone. Find supports at: ahs.ca/HelpInToughTimes