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Swine flu: Some pregnant women shunning H1N1 vaccine

They are more comfortable with holistic approach, despite doctors' warnings



Rachel Aguayo receives an acupuncture treatment from Yong Han at Pulling Down the Moon. Aguayo, 26, made a personal and potentially risky choice when she ignored her midwife's advice and opted for alternative, holistic ways to fend off the virus -- acupuncture, yoga, healthy eating and what she calls "obsessive" hand-washing. (Tribune photo by Brian Cassella / November 9, 2009)

By Dahleen Glanton Tribune reporter

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For months, Rachel Aguayo, who is **pregnant** with her first child, has been bombarded with messages urging her to be among the first in line for the **H1N1** flu **vaccine**.

But the decision about whether to get the shot is particularly grueling for mothers-to-be, who must

balance doctors' orders against a natural inclination to avoid any medication or other substance that could jeopardize the health of their unborn child.

Many pregnant women get inoculated. But Aguayo, 26, made a personal and potentially risky choice when she ignored her midwife's advice and opted for alternative, holistic ways to fend off the **virus** -- acupuncture, **yoga**, healthy eating and what she calls "obsessive" hand-washing.

"I personally don't feel comfortable with the vaccine," said Aguayo. "Any decision I'm making with my body now isn't just for me anymore."

Health professionals have constantly warned pregnant women about the dangers they face if they contract the flu virus -- premature labor, miscarriages, landing in the hospital and even death. Most doctors advise that inoculation is the only way to fully protect themselves and their children. Still, some are searching for alternatives.

Herbs, yoga and other holistic methods have long been used to help women conceive and to boost their **immune system** once they become pregnant. Now, with pregnant women among the high-risk groups for serious complications from the H1N1 virus, some are turning to those techniques in an attempt to protect themselves from the swine flu.

Dr. Chun-Su Yuan, director of the Tang Center for Herbal Medicine Research at the **University of Chicago**, said there is no clinical evidence proving that herbs and other holistic methods can ward off swine flu. It is possible, however, that some herbs may increase immune activity, he said.

"As a medical doctor, I would say the risks of the **swine flu vaccine** are much less than the benefits, so people should get the vaccine," said Yuan. "But for people who have decided absolutely not to take the vaccine or if they are allergic to it, looking at herbs and other alternatives could be useful."

Holistic workers said they have seen a spike in pregnant women who are seeking more natural ways to protect themselves during the pandemic. The vaccine is a particularly hard sell to pregnant women who had difficulty conceiving, according to Tami Quinn, owner of Pulling Down the Moon, a holistic health center in Chicago.

"These women are nervous about everything, every cough, every sneeze," said Quinn. "They thought they would get married, move to the suburbs and have their baby, and nothing has been easy. Now with H1N1, they feel like, Why me?"

Quinn said she does not make recommendations to women, but she provides services to help them in whatever route they choose.

Medical doctors said there is nothing wrong with using such methods to boost the immune system, but they warn that it is dangerous to rely on holistic measures as the sole means of guarding against H1N1.

"We do see women who are apprehensive, but we tell them that the complications of getting sick are very dangerous and the best way to protect yourself is with the vaccine," said Dr. Dayna Salasche, an obstetrician-gynecologist at the Northwestern Specialists for Women, an affiliate of Northwestern Hospital. "We counsel them, but ultimately it is their decision."

The majority of women, Salasche said, do end up following their doctor's advice. But even those who decide to get the vaccine can have difficulty finding it. With the vaccine slowly making its way to obstetricians and people waiting in line for hours at public clinics, some have turned to holistic methods until the vaccine becomes available.

Radhika Mathur, 31, of Chicago, said her immune system has been compromised during her pregnancy and she suffers from frequent throat infections. She said she is eager to get the vaccine, but it could be December before her obstetrician gets it.

In the meantime, she said, she has been doing weekly meditation sessions, yoga, acupuncture and Reiki, a stress-reducing technique.

"I'm scared to go out and take public transportation without having that injection in me," said Mathur, who is six months pregnant with her first child. "Holistic stuff can help you de-stress and get your body back on track. Combined with medicine, it can be very effective."

Robert Wallace, owner of Chicago **Holistic Medicine**, said about half of his clients will get the vaccine and half will not. He said he does not encourage them one way or the other, but he provides information on both sides of the issue.

Though health officials have tried to convey to women that the vaccine is safely produced the same way as seasonal flu vaccine, which is backed by a long history of clinical trials, some pregnant women still have lingering concerns that the vaccine could contain adjuvants such as squalene, which enhance the effects of the vaccine, and thimerosal, a mercury derivative used as a preservative.

The **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** said the H1N1 vaccine does not contain adjuvants. Health officials said there is no evidence that thimerosal is harmful to pregnant women or their fetus, but the H1N1 vaccine is available without the preservative for die-hard doubters.

Still, Aguayo, a receptionist at Pulling Down the Moon, said she prefers alternative methods, though she is troubled by reports that pregnant women have died of H1N1.

"This is something I take very seriously and I think about it almost every day," she said. "It's an internal battle, but so far I have not been able to reconcile my fears about the vaccine."

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