

**PRINT-Percentage of pregnant women vaccinated against COVID-19 ‘alarmingly low’**  
***Impact starting to show in hospital ICUs***

As the delta variant becomes more common, now making up 99% of cases in the U.S., OSF HealthCare frontline doctors are seeing more and more cases of pregnant women admitted to the hospital because they’re infected with the virus. At some hospitals in the Southeast, there are entire intensive care units full of pregnant women on ventilators, and the fear is that could happen in the Midwest.

Dr. Michael Leonardi, MD, an-OBGYN and maternal-fetal medicine specialist at OSF HealthCare, says the number of fully vaccinated pregnant women who are being cared for within the 15-hospital health system is “alarmingly low.”

The latest published data shows approximately 25% of pregnant women nationwide are partially or fully vaccinated. OSF HealthCare leaders say pregnant women in the care of our physicians are at or slightly below that vaccination rate.

Dr. Leonardi fears low vaccination rates combined with not enough people sticking to mitigation factors, such as social distancing, wearing masks and washing hands, could cause increasing numbers of pregnant women in states such as Illinois and Michigan to be hospitalized, repeating what hospitals and women in the Southeast are facing.

“I am scared to death we are going to start losing pregnant women from COVID.”

The Chicago Tribune reports that at one point last week, only one ICU bed was available across all 22 hospitals in southern Illinois — a region with more than 400,000 residents, according to the 2020 U.S. census.

Leonardi is worried about what he’s starting to see in OSF HealthCare hospitals.

“We’ve had several pregnant women in our ICUs, we’ve had several pregnant women on ventilators because of COVID, and pregnant women having to be delivered prematurely because of COVID – more than one. Last weekend, when I was on call and rounding, one-third of labor and delivery beds were taken up by women with COVID who had no reason other than COVID to be in the hospital.”

Dr. Leonardi stresses the long-term negative consequences of having COVID on a pregnant woman and her fetus is far greater than any negative side effect from the vaccine. He says that’s because pregnancy puts women at high risk for complications from the virus.

“Pregnant women who get infected with COVID are three or four times more likely to end up in an intensive care unit, several times more likely to end up on a ventilator, and a couple times more likely to die than the exact same person who is not pregnant.”

Pregnant women who have underlying medical conditions, such as diabetes, obesity or high blood pressure, also might be at even higher risk of severe illness due to COVID-19. [Newly released research](#) shows even women who get COVID-19 but don’t have serious symptoms are at high risk for a serious condition called [preeclampsia](#) in which high blood pressure can force early delivery.

The most common reasons cited by women who aren’t vaccinated include concerns about safety due to rapid development and long-term effects. More than 5 billion doses of the COVID-19 vaccines have been administered globally with few, rare, serious side effects. The Immunization Action Coalition says, currently, the United States has the safest, most effective vaccine supply in history with ongoing safety data collection. The Coalition highlights that any side effects of today’s modern-era vaccines occurred within six weeks of being administered but with *no* lasting negative impacts.

As women do the cost-benefit analysis to make what he acknowledges is a difficult but important decision, Dr. Leonardi wants them to know there is no evidence or even biologically plausible reason to

be concerned about [any impact on fertility](#) or increased risk for birth defects or miscarriage from the COVID-19 vaccine. Meanwhile, he urges pregnant women to consider evidence that being pregnant and getting COVID-19 can have dire long-term effects.

“Even though it’s scary (to get vaccinated against the virus), the thought of a pregnant lady dying from COVID or the thought of a pregnant lady having to be delivered months early and then her child having complications for its whole life – that’s scarier to me.”

Babies may not yet be eligible for the COVID vaccine, but a recent study suggests if their mother gets vaccinated, they can glean immunity either in the womb or through breastmilk.

“The mom who has been vaccinated against COVID has antibodies against COVID in her breast milk that help protect her baby from getting COVID in the community.”

Lastly, Dr. Leonardi stresses that it can take between five to six weeks to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and if women wait to see if cases continue to climb in their community, it could be too late to become fully protected against a highly contagious and potentially life-threatening virus.