



PEACE OF MIND FOR NEW MOMS, MOMS-TO-BE, AND FAMILIES

Experts from St. Paul's Hospital Maternity Centre
answer your questions about COVID-19

Is it safe to have my baby at St. Paul's Hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In a word: yes!

We're taking all the necessary steps to look after you and your family safely during this time. We continue to provide 1:1 nursing care during your labour experience. And expert obstetrical, family practice, pediatric, midwifery, and nursing care are all in place to support you and your family during your birthing experience.

And there's more good news: to date, evidence indicates that **pregnant women are at no more risk than non-pregnant women**. Additionally, so far there's a **much lower rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases among children** compared with the general population.

But, as coronavirus (COVID-19) cases increase across Canada and around the world, it can be overwhelming to make sense of all the information currently available. So we've asked our St. Paul's Hospital maternity experts to answer some of the most commonly asked questions from our community of moms.

How is COVID-19 transmitted?

The virus appears to spread through respiratory droplets and also by things that you touch (surfaces, towels, etc.). People are most contagious when they are most symptomatic (ie: when they are the sickest) but it can also spread even if a person is asymptomatic. To help restrict the spread of the infection, you and your family should focus on good hand hygiene, avoid handshakes and large gatherings, and practice social distancing.

Can COVID-19 be transmitted in pregnancy?

To date there have been a few reported cases of possible transmission from mother to baby in the womb but the rates appear to be low. And some of these infections may have been the result of the baby catching the virus after birth. That said, it does appear *possible* – although rare – for the virus to be transmitted to baby before birth. We are continually reviewing the literature to learn as much (and as quickly) as we can about this.

What effect does COVID-19 have on pregnant women and new moms?

The vast majority of women will experience either nothing (they'll be asymptomatic) or will have mild to moderate cold/flu like symptoms. Fever and cough are the most common symptoms; runny nose and sneezing are less frequent. The data suggest pregnant women don't get more (or less) sick than non-pregnant women who have contracted the virus.

Those at greatest risk with COVID-19 appear to be people who are older; those with suppressed immune systems; and those with underlying health conditions like diabetes, cancer, cardiac conditions, or chronic lung disease.

Does COVID-19 affect babies?

Based on our current knowledge, it is uncommon for the virus to cross the placenta and affect the baby. It also appears that COVID-19 does not induce premature labour. And, there is no information to suggest that COVID-19 causes miscarriage. Newborn babies who have been affected do not appear to develop a serious illness whether they caught the virus from transmission in the womb or early infection. As well, there has been a much lower rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases among children, relative to the general population, in all countries around the world.

Is a caesarean section safer?

There is no evidence to suggest that a caesarean section is safer for women who have COVID-19. And C-sections are not recommended as a birth option for this concern alone. The evidence we have at this time suggests that transmission to babies does not happen during pregnancy or during birth.

Are you screening all women who come to St. Paul's to have their babies?

We follow the guidelines recommended by the Centre for Disease Control from the experts on our own infection control team.

We assess *all* patients by asking basic screening questions for COVID-19. Women who are booked for a scheduled caesarean section are pre-screened on the phone (with standard screening questions) prior to coming to the hospital and are formally tested (swabbed for COVID-19) in our pre-admission clinic. If you are scheduled for a caesarean section, you will be contacted by our nurse and care team in advance to schedule testing and go over the process for your procedure.

Women who arrive for a vaginal delivery are asked the screening questions but are only swabbed and formally tested if they are symptomatic for COVID-19.

Of course, your obstetrician, family doctor, and/or midwife will also be monitoring you for symptoms during your regular check-ups prior to birth.

What will my labour experience be like at St. Paul's?

If you are planning a vaginal delivery, your labour experience should follow our usual, pre-COVID-19 process. If you are in labour and have tested positive for COVID-19, the current recommended practice is to have continuous electronic fetal monitoring and to consider early epidural.

Probably the biggest difference you'll notice is that our staff are taking all possible precautions to prevent the virus from spreading. This means they'll be wearing protective eye gear, a mask, and gloves at all times. Otherwise, we will do everything we can to normalize this time for you and your partner.

You are welcome to have one person accompany you to the hospital (for example, your partner). Although, if your support person has symptoms of COVID-19, he/she will not be permitted to enter the hospital.

You can also have a *certified* doula accompany you: that person must be certified by DONA International and must not be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.

If we were not in this pandemic, you would be welcome to bring a broader support team and your extended family would be invited to wait in our family area. However, to protect our families and our staff, we're not allowing visitors or extended family members in the Maternity Centre.

Can my partner be with me if my baby is born via caesarean section?

Yes, unless you have tested positive for COVID-19. Unfortunately, in this situation no support person will be permitted in the operating room for the safety of mom, baby, partner, and care team.

Otherwise, one support person is permitted to be with you in the operating room as long as that person is symptom-free. This applies to both scheduled caesarean births and to urgent or un-planned C-sections. So if your planned vaginal birth requires an urgent or emergency caesarean section, know that we will do everything possible to ensure your partner or support person is there to accompany you. Please note, in rare situations, this may not be feasible.

If your primary care provider is a family physician or midwife, and you require a caesarean birth, we will continue to support one individual of your choosing in the operating room. Our maternity clinical leadership team is supportive of this to reduce the number of people in the operating room.

After the baby is born, can my partner/support person leave the Maternity Centre and come back?

We recommend that your partner stay with you for the entire duration of your stay at St. Paul's Hospital Maternity Centre. To facilitate this, we are happy to order meals for your partner during this time. Our rationale is that if your partner is going back and forth into the community, there may be an increased risk of transmission by bringing the virus back to the Maternity Centre. Of course, we recognize that you may have children at home who need care. Or your partner may want to go directly home, shower, rest, and return to the unit without coming into contact with anyone.

Please advise our care team if your partner needs to leave the unit. We will work together to ensure everyone's safety.

Does the Maternity Centre have complimentary WIFI?

Yes! We have free WIFI and we encourage you to virtually introduce your new baby to your family and friends during your stay.

Are all the same pain and analgesic options available to me during this time?

Entonox (laughing gas) is not available during this time. In fact, the use of Entonox has been suspended at all hospitals within the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority including BC Women's Hospital.

Narcotics and epidurals are still available as are comfort measures such as walking and showering.

And of course, we continue to support you with expert obstetrical, family practice, pediatric, midwifery, and nursing care.

What about breastfeeding?

Breastfeeding is encouraged for all moms who want to do so. And while protective antibodies pass through breast milk, there is no evidence to suggest that COVID-19 does.

If you have COVID-19, the risk of transmission doesn't come from breast milk, it comes from close contact with the baby (because the virus is most commonly spread by respiratory droplets). For that reason, we recommend that new moms with COVID-19 wear face masks while feeding. And of course, all moms should thoroughly wash their hands for at least 20 seconds before each feed.

But, other than those two guidelines, we encourage you to breastfeed your newborn.

The Vancouver Breastfeeding Clinic (<https://breastfeedingclinic.com/>) has virtual appointments and can do in-person appointments in a safe environment for anyone who needs to be seen. You'll need a referral from your obstetrician, family doctor or midwife.

Baby Prep (<https://www.babyprep.ca/>) is also offering virtual lactation support via FaceTime. Please note that this is a private, fee-based service. You do not need a referral.

We also have information for parents to learn how to weigh their newborn at home. This information will be shared by our medical, midwifery and nursing team during your hospital stay.

Are there any special precautions to take around bottle feeding and sterilization due to COVID-19?

No. All the usual processes around bottle sterilization and cleanliness still apply. We recommend the following:

- Always wash your hands before handling baby bottles or feeding your baby;
- Scrub bottles and components in hot, soapy water (some experts recommend boiling for 5 minutes); then rinse to get rid of all traces of soap;
- Always wash, thoroughly rinse, and dry the top of the formula can before you open it; make sure your can opener, mixing cups, jars, spoons, and other equipment are clean.

What can I do to stay healthy?

The advice for pregnant women is no different from everyone else in the general community. That said, here are some things to keep in mind.

- Think about keeping grandparents safe.

Now is a great time to think about what would happen should you or your partner become ill. We often call on grandparents when we need help caring for our children in these situations. But it's important to remember that older people who contract COVID-19 are the most likely to become seriously ill and have the highest risk of fatality.

Think about who else you could call on besides grandparents or older people.

If you become symptomatic, and you have to call on grandparents, please ensure you've spoken with them about how they can reduce their risk of infection while caring for your baby or children.

- Hygiene is key

The most important thing you can do to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 is to practice good hygiene. Clean your hands regularly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer; cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or bent elbow when coughing or sneezing; avoid touching your face, nose and mouth; don't shake hands; stay home if you are unwell; avoid contact with anyone who is unwell; practice physical distancing by staying 2 meters away from others wherever possible.

The best way to keep your baby safe is to self-isolate with your immediate family/caregivers and practice good hand hygiene. After discharge, introduce your new baby to loved ones with virtual visits rather than in-person visits. And limit visits outside – but do keep your scheduled follow-ups for you and baby.

What if I feel unwell or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19? (Fever, coughing, runny nose, general feeling of malaise, etc.)

If you have symptoms of COVID-19 but otherwise no pregnancy-related complications, contact your primary health care provider or call 811 for screening and advice.

Can I come to the Maternity Centre at St. Paul's Hospital if I am unwell or should I attend an Emergency Department? Even postpartum?

If you have pregnancy complications, *please* come to the Maternity Centre regardless of other symptoms. If you have symptoms of COVID-19 but no other pregnancy complications, contact your primary health care provider or call 811 for screening and advice.

Am I at risk of contracting COVID-19 by coming to St. Paul's? Do you have masks to protect patients?

It is safe to come to St. Paul's Hospital to have your baby. Our medical, midwifery, and nursing teams are all prepared to care for you and your family safely. And we are taking all precautions to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus. For example, you will notice that all of our care staff are wearing protective eye gear and masks.

If you are COVID-19 positive, we will ensure you have a mask as appropriate for the situation. Note that if your birth partner is COVID-19 positive, that person will not be permitted to accompany you into the hospital.

Is it possible that St. Paul's Maternity Centre will close during this time?

We are open and ready to deliver your baby. We work closely with our partners at BC Women's Hospital and collectively we will do whatever is necessary to provide the best care to you and your family during this time.

We have added precautions to keep our women, newborns and staff safe.

We have restricted visitors to one partner OR one support person in addition to one DONA International certified doula.

Unfortunately, siblings are not able to visit at this time. Further, we recommend that you not choose a grandparent (or elderly person) to be your support person. Seniors are most at risk from COVID-19. No substitution of support persons will be permitted.

Babies in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) are permitted to have mom visit plus one partner OR support person. Siblings and grandparents are not permitted to visit at this time.

Will I have to share a room?

No. All of the rooms in the Maternity Centre are single rooms.

What if my partner/support person shows symptoms, is sick, or is in isolation? Can they still be my birth partner? Can they still visit?

No. Someone who is sick cannot be your support person and they cannot visit.

If I have symptoms will my booked caesarean procedure go ahead?

It depends. You will be assessed by the medical team and, depending on the severity of your symptoms, an individualized care plan will be made.

Can I be discharged home early?

We are discouraging discharge before 24-hours as we need time to complete tests to make sure your baby is healthy. Once these tests are complete, and you and your baby are ready, we are happy for you to go.

Are prenatal classes available?

Our in-person classes are temporarily suspended but we are planning to have virtual classes. More information will be provided when this is available.

Baby Prep (<https://www.babyprep.ca/>) is a private prenatal program that you may find helpful during this time. There is a cost to register.

What happens if I go into labour while I am in self-isolation?

No matter what, your maternity team will do everything to ensure you and your baby receive safe, quality care while respecting your birth plan as closely as possible.

- You are advised to attend hospital via private transport if possible.
- When you arrive at St. Paul's Hospital Maternity Centre, we will undertake a health screen. If you have suspected or confirmed COVID-19, you will be provided with a surgical face mask that needs to stay on until advised otherwise.
- Coronavirus testing will be arranged.
- Patients may each have a maximum of one visitor OR support person/birth partner. Your birth partner will be able to stay with you throughout your labour. You can also have a DONA International certified doula in the birthing room.

Will I be able to stay with my baby/provide skin-to-skin if I have suspected or confirmed COVID-19?

Your situation will be reviewed by your medical team to discuss the risks and benefits and plan the most appropriate care for you and your baby. But based on current knowledge – and assuming both you and baby are stable – we recommend skin-to-skin care (with appropriate mask and hygiene). This guidance may change as knowledge evolves.

What if my baby is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)? Can I visit?

Babies in the NICU are permitted to have mom plus one partner OR support person. Siblings and grandparents are not permitted to visit at this time.

Note that your support person is not interchangeable. For example, you cannot have your partner today and a grandparent tomorrow. The support person must remain consistent throughout the baby's stay.

This guidance may change as information evolves.

Special planning will take place with our medical and nursing teams in the event the baby's parents test positive for COVID-19. As you would expect, our priority is to keep our babies, parents, and staff as safe as possible.

What is NICU doing to protect babies from getting COVID-19?

Staff members who are ill with any illness do not come into work. They must stay home. This is particularly important in the NICU as any infection can be dangerous for our seriously ill or premature babies.

Staff members are wearing additional personal protective gear which may include masks, gloves, and eye wear.

NICU beds are spaced to ensure that all babies/families are 2 metres apart. Babies who are suspected or known to have COVID-19 will be cared for in a nursery separate from our other babies.

In addition, St. Paul's Hospital as a whole (not just the Maternity Centre) has limited visitors and non-essential staff. All patients, visitors, and staff now undergo routine health screening before coming into the hospital.

What happens if a baby in NICU gets COVID-19?

Evidence emerging from other countries suggests that it is very uncommon for newborn babies to be born with COVID-19, even if the mother has the virus.

Babies who contract the illness after birth appear to have only a mild illness.

We still do not know what effects the illness will have on vulnerable premature babies or babies with underlying conditions. With an abundance of caution, we have strong measures in place to protect our babies, parents, and staff.

Would it be safer to just stop visiting my baby in NICU altogether?

If you follow the guidelines, you are safe to visit your baby. Your baby needs to experience your touch, smell, and/or voice and it will benefit both of you to have skin-to-skin time. So as long as you are well, it is important for you and your baby to have this time together.

Can I bring my other children to the hospital grounds (outside) to meet our newborn?

No. Children are not permitted to visit the hospital, including the hospital grounds. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause. This decision has been made to keep our women, newborns, and staff safe while we continue to provide care at St. Paul's.

• **Should I consider changing to a home birth?**

• No. If you are booked to have your baby at St. Paul's, you should continue to follow that plan.

As COVID-19 continues to evolve, St. Paul's Hospital is committed to providing compassionate care. And we have taken strong measures to ensure the safety of our mothers, babies, staff, and community.

If you have any questions, please speak with your obstetrician, family doctor, or midwife.

• **I would like to know more about COVID-19**

• <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/clinical-care/pregnancy>

<http://www.stpaulsmaternity.ca/>

If have any further questions, please contact your midwife, family doctor, or obstetrician.