Safe to conceive, even in Covid-19 climate, say doctors

No evidence being pregnant increases a woman's risk of infection

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As the pandemic rages on, expectant mothers have not been spared the fear that the virus could negatively impact their pregnancy.

Last week, a newborn died shortly after delivery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the US. Her mother, who has the coronavirus, went into labour prematurely during respiratory distress caused by the virus.

But so far, very few infants globally have died due to the virus, and there have not been widespread reports of mother-to-baby transmission.

Associate Professor Tan Hak Koon, chairman of the division of obstetrics and gynaecology at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, told The New Paper that couples who intend to conceive should continue to do so even during this period.

There is currently no evidence that being pregnant increases a woman's risk of getting Covid-19, or of developing severe symptoms if she has the disease.

He said: "However, pregnant women are known to be at greater risk of severe morbidity and mortality from other respiratory infections such as influenza and Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome). This is due to the change in pregnant women's immunity during pregnancy, therefore putting them at a higher risk for viral infections."

Associate Professor Su Lin Lin, head and senior consultant of the division of maternal-fetal medicine at National University Hospital's Women's Centre, said: "There is no specific reason to discourage or advise against pregnancy at this time.

"There is limited information about this condition in pregnancy, and unlike Zika, there is no evidence that exposure to the Covid-19 virus can cause abnormalities in unborn babies."

Mums-to-be can be reassured that a detailed management workflow is in place to look after any pregnant woman affected by Covid-19, said Dr Su.

She added that taking precautions such as observing safe distancing, avoiding crowds and gatherings, and practising good personal hygiene like washing and sanitising hands after contact with frequently touched surfaces would suffice.

Associate Professor Yong Tze Tein of Singapore General Hospital said it is uncertain if Covid-19 could be transmitted from mother to baby during vaginal delivery.

The head and senior consultant, department of obstetrics and gynaecology, said: "It is unknown if there is an increased risk of fetal anomalies at this juncture, although data from Sars did not show an increased risk. There have been two reported cases of neonates who tested positive for Covid-19, but it is uncertain how the infection was transmitted."

A 36-year-old expectant mother, who wanted to be known only as Amanda, is seven months pregnant and is worried her husband will not be allowed into the delivery ward if the outbreak worsens.

She told TNP she has been taking precautions such as staying home and limiting her trips out to only the supermarket.

IVF treatments a calculated risk: Fertility experts

Amid Covid-19, many women across Europe, the UK and the US are being dissuaded by their obstetricians and gynaecologists against fertility treatments, with some having to discontinue procedures like in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) halfway.

But Dr Loh Seong Fuee, medical director of Thomson Fertility Centre, told The New Paper that fertility treatments in Singapore are still going on as per usual, with no specific advisory against them.

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However, going through IVF treatments and conceiving at this time should be a calculated risk, and couples must take steps to be extra cautious as expectant mothers are immunocompromised, which means they are at increased risk of developing pneumonia and going into respiratory distress.

Dr Loh said: "Covid-19 is a novel virus and treatment options are limited. Even if some treatments are effective on the mother, we are unsure how it could affect the baby."

Dr Ann Tan, medical director of Virtus Fertility Centre, added: "The situation in Singapore gets more dire, I will consider suspending all new treatment cycles all together."

"Patients must make an informed choice regarding their fertility journey, and it is our responsibility to advise our patients appropriately."

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