Questions and answers for pregnant women

Why are pregnant women being invited for vaccination?
While swine flu is a mild illness for most people, it can be very serious. Experience in the UK and other countries suggests that pregnant women are around four times as likely to develop serious complications as a result of swine flu compared to women who are not pregnant. Serious complications include pneumonia and heart and lung problems. Pregnant women are about 10 times as likely to become so ill they need to be admitted to hospital. Sadly, some pregnant women have died as a result of swine flu infection.

The vaccine can protect you and your unborn baby from the effects of swine flu.

Is the vaccine safe for my baby?
Yes. The swine flu vaccine is licensed for use in pregnancy by the European Medicines Agency. Although pregnant women and their carers are naturally cautious about taking vaccines, very few vaccines cause risks in pregnancy. Vaccines similar to the swine flu vaccine have been regularly used in other countries. Millions of pregnant women have received seasonal flu vaccine in the USA.

If this is a new vaccine, how do we know it is safe?
The swine flu vaccine is a new vaccine because swine flu is a new virus. It has undergone tests and has been licensed for use in pregnant women by the European Medicines Agency. Licensed vaccines, including swine flu vaccine are held to very high safety standards and the vaccine would not have been granted a license if it was considered unsafe. The swine flu vaccine is similar to the seasonal (ordinary) flu vaccine which has been given safely to millions of women across the world. Studies looking at the effects of giving pregnant women the seasonal flu vaccination found that it caused no bad effects on pregnant women or their babies.
Does the vaccine cause any side effects in pregnant women?
As with all medicines, some people have experienced side effects. Side effects from vaccinations are similar in pregnant and non-pregnant women. Side effects are usually mild and the most common include redness, pain and swelling at the injection site. Some people experience symptoms such as headache, aches and shivering. These are usually much milder than the flu and can be treated with paracetamol.

The swine flu vaccine does not contain live virus and cannot give you the flu.

What is the difference between antivirals (such as Tamiflu and Relenza) and the swine flu vaccine?
Antivirals work by making it harder for the swine flu virus to live in your body. They only work in this way while you are taking them and do not offer long-term protection. The vaccine works by giving you immunity to swine flu. This means that if you come into contact with the swine flu virus, your body can fight it off.

I have taken a course of antiviral treatment. Should I still get the vaccine?
Yes. The vaccine gives long term protection against swine flu.

I have been diagnosed with swine flu in the past. Should I still get the vaccine?
Unless you had a swab test that was positive you should have the vaccine. Many infections have symptoms similar to swine flu, so it is impossible to say for certain if you had swine flu or another infection unless you had a positive swab taken when you were ill.

Can I have a test to see if I have had swine flu before having the vaccine?
No. The swine flu test we use has to be done at the time you are unwell.

What does the vaccine contain?
The vaccine contains antigen, an adjuvant and a preservative. The antigen is the part of the vaccine that gets the body to produce immunity. In the swine flu vaccine it consists of virus parts – not the live virus. Adjuvant is added to vaccines to improve the body’s immune response. A preservative called Thiomersal is added to prevent contamination of the vaccine.
I have heard that Thiomersal contains mercury. Is it safe to have this in pregnancy?
The swine flu vaccine contains Thiomersal, which is a preservative that contains a very small amount of mercury. The type of mercury it contains is broken down and excreted very quickly from the body. Numerous studies into the effects of Thiomersal have found it to be safe. The Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) keeps the safety of vaccines under continual review. Their advice is that Thiomersal-containing vaccines do not present a risk to pregnant women or their babies.

What about the adjuvant?
An adjuvant improves the effectiveness of a medicine or helps the body produce an immune response. Many adjuvanted vaccines, including those for seasonal flu and tetanus, are regularly used for pregnant women who are at risk of becoming ill and their safety profiles are extremely good. The UK would not use a vaccine without careful consideration of safety issues.

Summary
The swine flu vaccine will help protect you and your baby from the effects of swine flu. The vaccine is approved for use in pregnant women. The swine flu vaccine will not give you the flu.

If you wish to discuss any of these questions in more details please speak to a member of staff at the vaccination clinic in your Trust.