

Swine-flu vaccine

The National Immunisation Advisory Committee of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI) has recommended that all women from 14 weeks pregnant to six weeks after giving birth should receive the H1N1 vaccine. For women up to 14 weeks, it says women who have one of a number of at-risk medical conditions, such as long-term lung or heart disease, should also be vaccinated.

Evidence suggests that pregnant women are four times more likely to develop serious complications or be hospitalised from H1N1 (swine flu) than non-pregnant women. These complications include early labour or severe pneumonia. The risk of these complications is higher after 14 weeks of pregnancy and for pregnant women who are at risk of medical complications.

It is generally agreed both nationally and internationally that potential complications associated with H1N1 in pregnancy far outweigh any possible risks associated with vaccination in pregnancy, the RCPI said.



Picking up the phone

Rita O'Reilly, manager of Parentline, which held National Parents' Week in conjunction with Abbott in October, says one of the main things that became clear after the week was the need for help that exists.

"We get 5,000 calls a year. It's not easy to admit you're having an issue with your parenting but the fact of the matter is everybody does at some stage. Among the main things people call about would be post-natal depression, premature babies, a baby that won't settle, jealousy between siblings and dealing with second relationships," she says.

"Parents used to have more people around them to bounce things off. We're noticing more dads ringing Parentline every year too - I think dads find it harder to turn around to a neighbour or another parent in the workplace or schoolyard and discuss a child. Any parent who picks up the phone looking for help is very brave."

You can contact Parentline on LoCall 1890 927 277 or online at www.parentline.ie.

Vivienne Connolly and Brian Fallon with Jordan Farrelly (10) and Katie Weir (eight) at the launch of the 5th Annual National Parents' Week

'If I were to be a mum again now, there would be two main things that would bother me - whether I should look after the baby myself or put it in a nursery, and the amount of TV and other electronic devices I should let my little one watch or play with'

each day. From 12 months of age, babies should be having three meals a day, plus a minimum of 350ml of milk per day (full-fat cows' milk or toddler milk).

- Babies learn to like the foods you give them. Keep offering healthy foods such as vegetables, even if your baby doesn't like them at first. If your child sees you eating the same foods as them, he will learn to enjoy them.

Before the birth

Of course, anxieties and concerns manifest themselves months before a baby is even born.

Mac Nicholas, who runs a one-day antenatal class in Dublin and Meath as well as doing post-natal home visits, says women continue to be petrified about labour. She tells the women in her class the facts about the different signs and stages in order to reassure them and lessen the anxiety.

"People don't know how to breathe and lose a lot of time over this during labour. Diet is important and mild exercise during pregnancy can speed up labour and recovery.

"I had three children in the space of four years and felt quite isolated, so I asked myself how other parents must feel. Around 80 people a month come to the one-day antenatal class and demand has really grown due to the increasing birth rate and hospitals being so busy," she says.

"In the Seventies and Eighties, most women stayed in hospital for a week to 10 days and when they got home their mother or mother-in-law moved in to help. Now, they're lucky to be in for three days and many live out in commuter belts and don't know their neighbours.

"Women have high expectations after having a baby, and many feel they're supposed to be perfect, having done well professionally in their lives. But they tend to be too hard on themselves. I tell them that once they have a healthy baby, anything else, such as successful breastfeeding, is a bonus."

Find out more about Mac Nicholas' classes on www.2as1.ie.

The best things in life may be free, but, nevertheless, money is a big worry for parents since the recession hit. New research from SMA Nutrition shows that after worries about health and safety, financial concerns were found to be the most significant challenge for new parents, with almost half of the sample (45pc) citing money worries as one of their biggest concerns.

Parents feel so strongly about this that 15,000 signed a petition in October opposing any cuts or changes to child benefit in the upcoming Budget.

The National Women's Council of Ireland joined Parents Against Child Unfriendly Budget to hand over the signatures to An Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD, saying the cuts would have "disastrous effects on families, who are already stretched financially".

SMA Nutrition set up the 'Every Step Panel of Experts' recently with 'Money Doctor' John Lowe on hand to answer questions online at www.rollercoaster.ie/sma. Otherwise, the panel consists of family psychotherapist John Sharry, midwife and antenatal expert Susan Mac Nicholas and nutritionist Anne Sidnell.

So far, half of the questions submitted by parents fall under the category of feeding and nutrition. Generally, there are three main areas: weaning (when to do it, what are the best foods, fussy eaters, follow-on formulas etc); breastfeeding (the best pumps to use, how to store breast milk, vitamin D supplements etc); and how to deal with special dietary requirements such as lactose intolerance and hungrier babies.

Here are some of Sidnell's top tips in relation to weaning:

- Somewhere around the age of four to six months your baby will signal that he's ready for weaning. Iron is very important at this stage, so you should give your baby iron-rich foods (such as red meat), and iron-fortified foods (such as fortified cereals) to prevent iron deficiency.
- From six to 12 months, foods become more important but babies still need about 500-600ml (about a pint) of breast or formula milk