

Is covid-19 vaccine safe for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers?

KHONDOKER M AKRAM

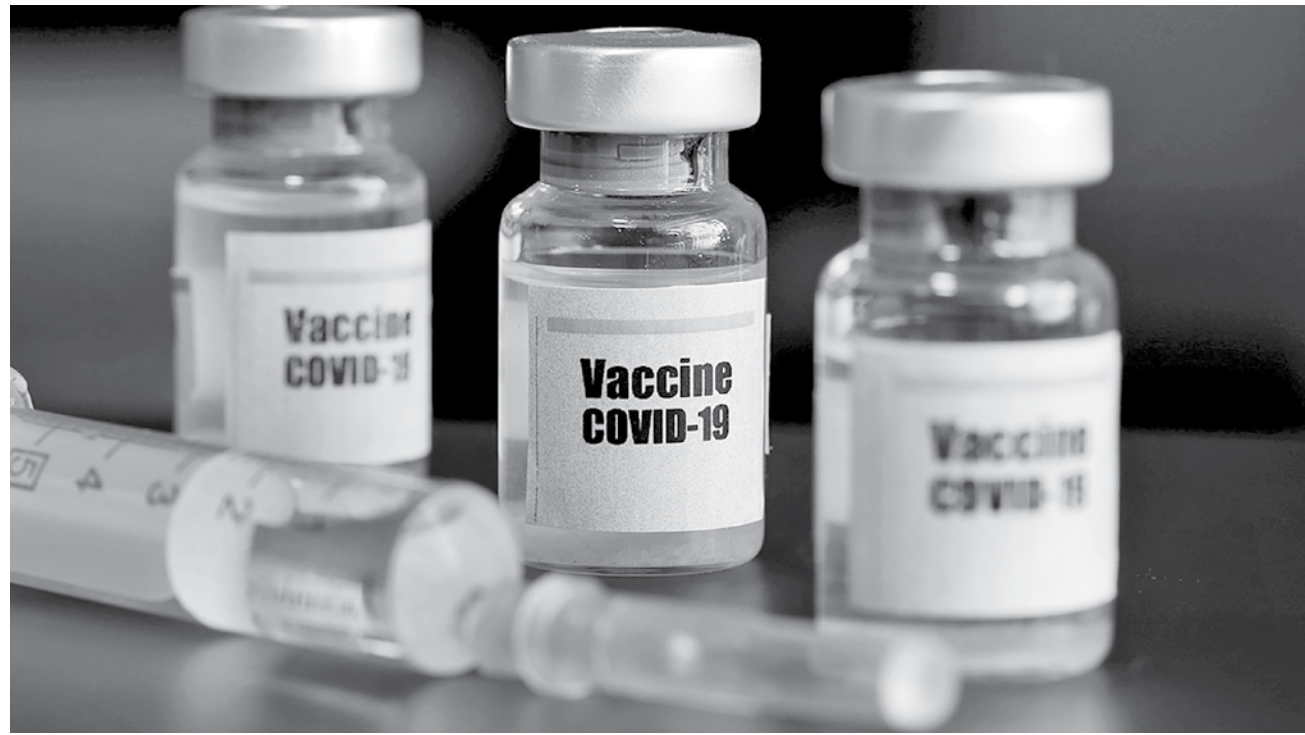
PREGNANT women and lactating mothers have not been included in the Covid mass vaccination programme in Bangladesh since the beginning, and the rule is still in force. Earlier in this year, when Covid vaccination was initiated in various countries, including the United Kingdom, pregnant women were excluded from the programme due to lack of safety information. During the clinical trials of major Covid vaccines, pregnant women were not included in the studies.

Currently, the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (RCOG) in the UK and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States recommend Covid vaccines for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. They assured the safety of Covid vaccines during pregnancy. For this reason, many experts have demanded an amendment in the vaccination policy during pregnancy in Bangladesh.

The question is, is Covid vaccine necessary for pregnant women? If yes, then at which stage of pregnancy should a vaccine be given? Is it in the first trimester, second trimester or in the last trimester? There are varieties of Covid vaccines available. Which type of vaccine is safer to be received during pregnancy? Is it the Oxford-AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna or Sinopharm vaccine? What is the basis for these vaccines being called safe? Have there been any recent clinical trials of Covid vaccines on pregnant women?

Firstly, during pregnancy, the body's immune system becomes suppressed to retain the baby inside the womb until delivery. This is why pregnant women are more likely to get infected by pathogens. Even ordinary influenza virus infection can be severe and life threatening during pregnancy.

A large UK study, published in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* on May 21, 2021, found that more than half of pregnant women infected with the coronavirus may remain asymptomatic. However, in



Small bottles labelled with a 'Vaccine COVID-19' sticker and a medical syringe are seen in this picture taken on April 10, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS

some cases infection turns into severe Covid and can cause life threatening complications in pregnancy and for the foetus. Covid during pregnancy increases the chances of premature births and stillborn babies by two-folds. Development of Covid just before labour can cause pre-eclampsia. In Bangladesh, Covid significantly increases maternal and perinatal deaths, as shown in a study conducted in Mugda Hospital.

For these reasons, it is necessary to vaccinate pregnant women. According to the RCOG, pregnant women are clinically vulnerable to Covid. Vaccination will reduce the risk of severe Covid during pregnancy and thus reduce maternal and newborn mortality.

Now, the question is, how do we know that Covid vaccines are safe during pregnancy? The CDC, FDA, RCOG and JCVI have all said that Covid vaccines are safe during pregnancy. This safety

information came from the V-Safe Pregnancy Registry, run by the CDC. It is an apps-based post-vaccination clinical data collection registry. Pregnant women in the US who have received the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine can enrol in the V-Safe registry and record all the side effects of the vaccine.

As of July 19, 2021, 1 lakh 36 thousand pregnant women who received Covid vaccines had registered in this V-Safe registry. A preliminary data analysis of the first 35,000 registered women's responses had been completed and the results were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on June 18. The results showed that the Covid vaccines did not increase the chances of spontaneous abortions and foetal or neonatal deaths than normal. In addition, other side effects of the vaccines were similar to those who were non-pregnant vaccine recipients. So, it

indicates that the mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) do not cause any serious harmful effects on pregnancy and newborns.

One aspect of this study should be noted carefully. Most of the participants in this analysis were vaccinated in the second or third trimester of pregnancies. Therefore, there is still a lack of information on how the Covid vaccines affect the foetus or the pregnancy outcome if the shot is given in the first trimester (first 12 weeks) of pregnancy or just before conception. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines have previously been tested on rats which did not show any detrimental effects on the foetus, pregnancy or fertility. Moreover, in the US, during the clinical trials of vaccines, nearly a thousand volunteers became pregnant, but their pregnancy outcomes were uneventful. In Scotland 4,000 pregnant women were also vaccinated

against Covid and none of them showed any detrimental side effects of the vaccine.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna vaccines do not contain any chemicals that could harm the foetus. However, since the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines have mostly been tested on pregnant women till date, the JCVI, CDC and FDA have advised that these two vaccines should be given to pregnant women, and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine could be the second option.

The next question is, at what stage of pregnancy is the vaccine safer? The first trimester of pregnancy is a crucial time for foetal development. Extra precaution is needed to administer any drugs during this period. In addition, studies showed that Covid in the third trimester of pregnancy is more likely to turn into severe Covid increasing the risk of maternal and neonatal deaths. Considering these facts, the JCVI and CDC rationalised administration of Covid vaccine in the second or third trimesters of pregnancy.

The Covid vaccine is also safe for lactating mothers. Studies have shown that vaccine-generated antibodies can be released into breast milk. But, none of the studies detected any other components of vaccines (spike protein or virus) in breast milk. This is why the JCVI and CDC recommend Covid vaccines to the breastfeeding mothers.

So, the following conclusions can be drawn from the above evidence: (1) Although there is no clinical trial data, according to the real-world evidence, the Covid vaccine is safe for pregnant women and unborn babies; (2) Covid vaccine is safer to give in the second or third trimester of pregnancy; (3) Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are the safer options in pregnancy and lactation, as other vaccines lack safety information; (4) Pregnant health workers or those with comorbidities must be vaccinated on a priority basis and; (5) Covid vaccines are safe for lactating mothers and they should also be included in the mass vaccination programme.

Dr Khondoker M Akram is a contributor-doctor based in London.

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We need safety net for garment workers



AFTER all the talk of "bouncing back better" in our industry during the past 18-months, we are still failing the people who make our clothes.

Garment workers have been described by one human rights organisation as the "weakest link" in the fashion supply chain. When the pandemic hit, they were the first to be hit, and they continue to suffer.

My concern is that we have not learned our lessons and that garment workers will continue to bear the brunt of economic shocks in our sector in future, unless we introduce fundamental, binding changes.

The underlying issue here is that there is a lack of social security system for the workers employed in the Bangladesh apparel industry. Unlike in other countries, there is no government furlough for months on end, no large redundancy pay-outs, and no guarantee of long-term social security payments. This means that when an economic shock hits, the only thing workers often have left to rely on is their (usually meagre) savings.

Most garment workers will be lucky if they have enough money put aside to pay their rent and other bills for a month. It has been no surprise to see thousands of workers returning to their

families in the villages when job losses/lay-offs have begun to stack up in the garment hubs during the pandemic.

Has there been any help for garment workers? At the moment, there is the Workers Welfare Fund in Bangladesh. This is a scheme whereby apparel exporting factories contribute 0.03 percent of their export value (which is about USD 10 million per year and will increase with the increase of the country's apparel export volumes) and from this fund apparel workers are paid for injury or death coverage.

As the problems of the past 18 months have shown us, this scheme is clearly not enough to provide the safety net which our garment workers need for their broader financial needs. First of all, amount such USD 10 million is not enough; because there are about 4 million garment workers in Bangladesh, and thus in a time of crisis when everyone will be affected, this will mean only USD 2.5 per worker. Moreover, the current Workers Welfare Fund only covers injury or death schemes. But the safety net will also include support for the workers such as income support during crises/lockdowns, unemployment benefits, severance, etc.

The government in consultation with the manufacturers, buyers and labour leaders can form the safety net for the workers. In agreement with all the stakeholders, the government may allocate around 0.5 percent of total export value to this safety net fund. Such a move would put the amount of money raised to billions of dollars rather than millions and might realistically mean



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PHOTO: AFP

that garment workers were adequately protected from economic shocks.

This money could be completely ring-fenced by the manufacturers where invoicing is concerned so that it was earmarked specifically for garment workers' protection. That way, the money would be completely protected. I believe most ethical fashion brands would get behind such a safety net, provided it was transparently implemented and monitored with accountability. Moreover, if done properly, it could be sold as a major reason why brands should source from Bangladesh compared to other locations. Brands would also be able to satisfy themselves that they were doing something

meaningful and tangible to support garment workers.

Are there any alternatives? In the past year we have seen the ILO establish an initiative which was intended to support garment workers. However, this "call to action" has so far, after 12-months of being launched, failed to achieve anything significant.

We have also had proposals from NGOs for brands to negotiate enforceable agreements to support stronger social protections for workers related to unemployment and severance benefits, in line with relevant ILO conventions, through the establishment of a "Severance Guarantee Fund".

The purpose of such a fund, we

are told, would be to pay severance and outstanding wages in cases where employers have gone insolvent, or otherwise have terminated workers and can't be compelled to pay. The Severance Guarantee Fund would also mitigate the devastating consequences of unemployment for workers in the future by financially supplementing or strengthening government social protection programmes for unemployment or severance benefits.

In fact, there are many crossovers between the proposals for such a fund and the idea I am suggesting. In both cases, there would be binding agreements between brands and their suppliers to ensure that workers were never left destitute and without receiving wages and payments owed.

Long-term, we need to give much more thought to how we can implement systems and processes which guarantee garment workers are not left high and dry as a result of adverse events. As an industry, we all have a huge responsibility, with buyers themselves having duties under the UN Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights as well as under the OECD Guidelines for Responsible Supply Chains in the Garment Sector to respect the human rights of workers in their supply chain. This includes making sure that the workers who are the drivers of this industry are protected.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

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QUOTABLE Quote

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING
(1806–1861)
English poet

Measure not the work until the day's out and the labor done.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Info
- 5 Thanksgiving dish
- 9 Enthusiasm
- 10 Striped rock
- 12 Moved cautiously
- 13 Musical closes
- 14 Leafy vegetables
- 16 Print measures
- 17 Load unit
- 18 Leafy vegetable
- 20 Idolized
- 22 Start the bidding
- 23 Stand
- 25 Quite bright
- 28 Account book
- 32 Leafy vegetable
- 34 Keats work
- 35 Morse bit
- 36 Leafy vegetable
- 38 Moscow setting
- 40 Suffered
- 41 Daughter of Lear
- 42 Agitates
- 43 Put in stitches
- 44 Beholds

DOWN

- 1 Chinese food
- 2 "Twelfth Night" duke
- 3 Kitchen need
- 4 Cyclist, for one
- 5 Marina sight
- 6 Previously
- 7 Invented
- 8 Posture
- 9 Goddess of the hearth
- 11 German steel city
- 15 François has one
- 19 – the line (obeyed)
- 21 Tolled
- 24 Atlantic fish
- 25 Low point
- 26 Undermines
- 27 Power problem
- 29 Man in a mask
- 30 Yard tools
- 31 Oboists' needs
- 33 Home of the Huskies
- 37 Fisherman's hope
- 39 Hem and –

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BEETLE BAILEY

I SAID YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING SPECIAL FOR MY BIRTHDAY

I KNOW...

...AND AFTER LAST YEAR, I KNOW WHAT THAT REALLY MEANS

BABY BLUES

HEY, EVERYBODY! DAD'S GOING TO PLAY A SONG!

I APPRECIATE THE ENTHUSIASM, BUT I'M REALLY NOT THAT GOOD YET.

WE KNOW.

I'M JUST HERE FOR THE BAD WORDS.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A C H E
T R I E S
H O T E L
O U T
S C H O L A R
S H E R O N
J A M
O P A L
P A C
I N K
N E P A L
E L O P E
S T A R

A G H A
M A I N S
B I T T E
A B E T T E D
H U G
P E P E
H U H
V A P I D
D E L U G E D
N O T S
E D W I N
Y E A S T
E Y E S

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT