

Growing concern in S. Korea over vaccination for pregnant women

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People stand in line to take coronavirus tests at a screening clinic in front of Seoul City Hall, Seoul, South Korea. -EPA Pic

PREGNANT women in South Korea are not given exemptions for the country's vaccine pass and concern about the issue is growing in the country.

The country's Central Disease Control Headquarters said pregnant women were not given exemptions from the vaccine pass system because they were in the high-risk group for Covid-19.

It is therefore strongly recommended for them to get vaccinated, it said.

According to a Korea Times report, the European Medicines Agency's (EMA) had reviewed several studies and based on that, it was of the view that vaccines based on messenger RNA (mRNA) technology — such as Pfizer and Moderna — do not cause complications in pregnant women and fetuses.

However, pregnant women in South Korea have expressed anxiety over the vaccinations.

The EMA had explained that the review based on studies of about 65,000 pregnant women at each stage, it found no signs of a higher risk of serious side effects or complications such as miscarriage or premature birth to be caused by the mRNA vaccines.

The EMA acknowledged several limitations to the data, but emphasised that the results across the studies were consistent.

"The benefits of mRNA Covid-19 vaccination during pregnancy are greater than the possible risks for pregnant women and fetuses," the agency said.

However, pregnant women in South Korea said they are not completely reassured about the stated lack of side effects because many of them delayed their vaccinations under recommendation from their doctors.

According to the Times report, a 32-year-old woman, who is 25 weeks pregnant and only as Park, said she became pregnant while waiting for a vaccination date to be given to her.

"I haven't been able to go anywhere where the vaccine pass system has been implemented, so I've been staying mostly at home."

Another 38-year-old woman, who is 12 weeks pregnant, said her pregnancy was an advanced maternal age pregnancy and she was unable to easily decide to should receive the Covid-19 vaccine.

"I went to the public health center to register as a person exempt from the vaccine pass system, but the employee of the center told me that I'm not eligible," she said.

According to the government's guideline, if a person cannot get the vaccine for medical reasons, he or she can get a confirmation of exemption to the vaccine pass at a public health center with a doctor's declaration.

However, health authorities recommended pregnant women to receive vaccines for their own safety and that of their fetus.

Experts say that women before the 12th week of pregnancy should be included in the category eligible for vaccine pass exemption.

Hallym University Sacred Heart Hospital professor Chung Ki-suk said expectant mothers who receive the Covid-19 vaccine were at risk to themselves and their unborn child.

"So, they should be allowed to choose whether to receive the vaccine without being pressured," he said.

As of Dec 9, there were 2,087 pregnant women who have received a first dose of the vaccine and 1,175 pregnant women who have been administered a second dose.

The concern over the vaccine comes as authorities expect the highly contagious Omicron variant to become the dominant strain within this week in South Korea.

The government has now expanded home treatment of Covid-19 patients to those infected with the Omicron variant.