

Healthwatch Cheshire /NHS Cheshire CCG COVID-19 Vaccine Fertility Focus Group – Notes and Feedback - 16th March 2021

Background:

Anecdotally, Healthwatch Cheshire have been hearing that there could be an issue amongst young women in regard to getting the COVID-19 vaccination due to concerns about how it may affect fertility. In partnership with NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Healthwatch Cheshire hosted a focus group to have an informal conversation with young women about their views and the views of their wider social circle on the vaccine, potential concerns, and what they think about messaging and effective sources of information. This outline of the discussions held will be shared with communications colleagues in Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester Councils, NHS Cheshire CCG, and local hospital trusts, in order to influence communications messages around encouraging vaccine uptake amongst this cohort of people.

Attendees: A small group of people was put together, and all participants were asked to canvas views of people they know beforehand so that we could gain a broad range of views. They were joined by 3 representatives from Healthwatch Cheshire and 2 from NHS Cheshire CCG, including Dr Sinead Clarke, a Cheshire GP.

Date and time: Tuesday 16th March 2021, 6-7pm, via Zoom.

Thoughts and opinions discussed:

- Around half of people have already had the vaccine.
- A feeling that most people have already made their mind up whether they will or won't have the vaccine.
- Motivation to have the vaccine to get back to a 'normal life' as soon as possible, particularly to help elderly relatives.
- Concerns on what the outcome will be for the baby in years to come. Worries associated with Thalidomide (a drug given to pregnant women to combat morning sickness in the late 1950's/early 1960's which led to children being born with limb deformities).
- Somebody trying for a baby been advised not to have the vaccine - but concerned whether they can then be a key worker.
- People worried because others are worried. People raise an issue and then it becomes an issue for others. Worry can easily travel and gather speed.
- Concern about boosters and the implication of those - will we have to have each one even if pregnant?
- No research around miscarriage and any increased risks.
- People do seem to have trust in scientists - wouldn't have passed the vaccine if they thought there could be fertility issues.
- Concerns regarding the Contraceptive pill and whether the combination of the vaccine can cause any issues or even affect the pill from working.
- Concern that some contraceptive pills already carry a risk of blood clots and the news stories of the Astra Zeneca vaccine also being linked to blood clot risks.
- One person was questioned about contraception by the person giving them the vaccine although this is not a standard question that vaccinators are being advised to check on with people. It may be that this was asked due to pregnant women being advised not to have the vaccine rather than any effects the vaccine has on fertility.
- Newspaper coverage during testing phase raised concerns.

- IVF - what is the guidance and advice around getting the vaccine? Have there been any conversations around this?
- Some people may be concerned regarding the vaccine being developed so quickly and whether testing has been rigorous enough. This may cause people to wait and learn more about it as time goes on.
- Feedback of mixed messages, propaganda, scare stories. Articles with advice can be very wordy and complex to get your head around in order for people to make an informed decision. The media has played a role in providing confusion rather than clarity.
- Even if wanting the vaccine, the scaremongering at least makes people question.
- Some women would be happy to have their vaccine after they have finished breastfeeding a new baby.

Feedback from Dr Sinead Clarke:

- No reason to believe that the vaccine will affect fertility
- If someone is pregnant and gets COVID19, there is an increased risk of miscarriage and if you get COVID19 in the last trimester of pregnancy, there is a much greater risk of becoming very unwell with the virus.
- We know that there is an increased risk of developing blood clots if you get the virus.
- In terms of the Astra Zeneca vaccine, millions of people have now received this vaccine and the data shows that the incidents of blood clots following the vaccine is lower in number than the normal background incidents of blood clots.
- Many doctors are confused as to why some countries have paused the use of the Astra Zeneca vaccine which then puts people at an increased risk of getting COVID19 (especially as the virus can cause blood clots).
- Advice would be to have the vaccine if you are taking the contraceptive pill and also to have the vaccine if you are trying for a baby as COVID19 is a risk to pregnant women.
- Risks of COVID19 a lot worse than having the vaccine. This could be something that makes someone think of having it.
- In terms of IVF and having the vaccine, consultants will discuss with individuals on the best time to receive the vaccine. This is something that can be looked into further and more guidance gathered for sharing. (Healthwatch will share a recent document released by the British Fertility Society)

Are people discussing the vaccine with their friends, what are people talking about?

- Not really been a topic amongst people's friends. Some who have had concerns have talked about them amongst friends and then become less concerned by chatting it through with others.
- More worried about getting COVID19 than having the vaccine.
- Not concerned about the vaccine if it then leads to us getting back to normality.
- Someone commented that they would like to have the vaccine in order to then have a future and have children at some point.

Where do people get their information from and who do you trust to give you the correct information?

- Word of mouth and from trusted friends and family members
- Doctors on daytime television 'mythbusting' have helped whilst people working from home - see these as a trusted voice!
- Instagram - following reputable people and NHS sponsored stories.

- Social media influencers can play a key part in delivering positive messages around the vaccine e.g. Dr Alex from Love Island and Zoella, YouTube influencer.
- Twitter - sponsored ads on mythbusting but this does attract anti-vacc people and people posting lots of negative comments.
- British Medical Journal and NHS websites.

Any other concerns/comments?

- Astra Zeneca blood clot issue - whether people will still have it and the impact the news stories will have on people's decisions.
- Why do certain people get reactions to the vaccine and others don't? No reason why some people have side effects and others don't.
- Misconceptions about the severity of COVID19 so people don't think that a vaccine is needed.
- People shifting their stance and opinion because they think they'll be able to do things if they do get the vaccine. E.g. go on holiday.
- How did the vaccine get developed so quickly? Hasn't really been addressed fully and it would be good to have an explanation of its development and why it was able to be progressed and approved within a short period of time.

Next steps/actions to look at for health and care partners:

- Would be good to find someone on social media with a large following who could help to spread the message across Cheshire although this could be difficult
- How are we making FAQs attractive for people to click on and refer to?
- Where can people be directed to for information?
- Look at the possibility of sharing the video with the American lady who addresses concern about fertility.
- Review the document from the British Fertility Society.
- Look at messaging around any concerns with contraception.

Feedback on session from participants:

- It was commented how interesting the session was and hearing things that they didn't necessarily know from Dr Clarke - like the blood clot risk with Covid. It was also mentioned that Dr Clarke's comments about the blood clot risk in regard to the contraceptive pill and the AstraZeneca vaccine was reassuring.
- "It was interesting to be part of the conversation and to receive information from the GP to allay any fears around future fertility and Covid-19 vaccination".
- "It was great to be listened to and have things explained, and to feed in what had been heard from others ahead of the chat. Hearing things from a GP is so reassuring as they're the people we see when we're poorly so we trust them (when we have a good one). I think GPs feel like a very trustworthy source."
- Good to speak to a local level GP instead of seeing someone on talking on the television.

For more information on Healthwatch Cheshire visit
www.healthwatchcheshire.org.uk

For more information on NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group and the COVID-19 vaccination programme in Cheshire, visit: www.cheshireccg.nhs.uk