

Transcript Details

This is a transcript of an educational program. Details about the program and additional media formats for the program are accessible by visiting: <https://reachmd.com/programs/vaccination/addressing-fertility-concerns-caused-by-covid-19-vaccines/12890/>

ReachMD

www.reachmd.com
info@reachmd.com
(866) 423-7849

Addressing Fertility Concerns Caused by COVID-19 Vaccines

Announcer:

Welcome to *VacciNation* on ReachMD, sponsored by Moderna. Here's your host, Dr. Hector Chapa.

Dr. Chapa:

Despite the fact that there's no evidence showing any correlation between COVID-19 vaccines and a loss of fertility, many of our patients still have this concern. So, how did this myth become such a prominent fear? And how can we be more effective and talk to our patients about it? Welcome to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Hector Chapa and joining me today to examine this fertility concern surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines is Dr. Alex Pastuszak. He is Assistant Professor of Surgery and Urology in the Department of Surgery at the University of Utah School of Medicine in Salt Lake City. Dr. Pastuszak is also Chief Clinical Officer of Vault Health. Dr. Pastuszak specializes in the treatment of male infertility, as well as both male and female sexual dysfunction. I have to tell you, what a great topic this is, so Dr. Pastuszak, thank you for being here, today.

Dr. Pastuszak:

Thank you, Dr. Chapa. It's a real pleasure to be here, especially talking about this particular issue.

Dr. Chapa:

Alright, we've got lots to cover, so let's dive right in, Dr. Pastuszak. Look, we know that there's common fear and misperceptions out there, but I want to get your perspective, as a practicing physician, what have you heard or what are you hearing regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and these fears on reproductive health?

Dr. Pastuszak:

So, I think at this point, I've probably heard the gamut of responses ranging from graphene oxides in the vaccine are going to oscillate and cause me to have COVID symptoms which is going to negatively impact my fertility to I don't know pick your favorite alternate fact. But, most commonly, and just categorically I hear really that my male patients when they come in, they worry that their sperm count may go down, that their sperm won't work right, that their female partner is not going to be able to get pregnant if she gets the vaccine, if the female partner gets the vaccine, it's going to negatively affect the baby if a pregnancy occurs, and there's some literature/noise out there on negative impacts of the vaccine on the placenta, on the baby, itself. One of the other categories is that the effects of COVID or the symptoms of COVID will happen in me if I get the vaccine and that these could lead to issues with fertility. So, there's been a lot of noise in the space around COVID potentially being linked to erectile dysfunction, to issues with semen parameters to even and this has some pretty good factual basis, even to the lowering of testosterone, which is important for fertility. But those are roughly the categories in which patients come and talk to me. A lot of times they don't necessarily have the sophistication or the understanding of a very highly detailed level of fertility that they don't know the specific questions to ask. But, basically it's run the gamut relegated to those categories.

Dr. Chapa:

Now, with your work in particular, even though you of course, concentrate more on male infertility, but you cover both issues of infertility overall as a couple, do you see any concerns that may differ, specifically between men compared to women or does one carry more of the myth than the other, do you think?

Dr. Pastuszak:

I don't think either one carries more myth than the other. I think foundationally most of my patients, most patients for that matter, don't really know what to ask beyond 'Is this going to affect my fertility?' Now, they may have heard things in the media, they may have heard things on social media that would cause them to ask specific questions, but most of them are just really worried that there's going to be some negative effect on my ability to initiate a pregnancy. And then on the female side, I think the big difference is the woman carries the

baby and does the baking, so to speak will it affect how the placenta forms or ultimately the baby, itself?

Dr. Chapa:

Now that we've established that Dr. Pastuszak, I want to continue with this. Knowing that the data really does support that these vaccines are safe, where do you think, and you mentioned social media, but where else do these myths that become reality, so to speak, where do they originate from?

Dr. Pastuszak:

It's a tough question to answer in the sense that there is information that's available to people everywhere, the media and the social media, I'll pick on those just to the extent that those are very easy avenues by which people can get information anytime, anywhere. And I think that even the lay media have sensationalized aspects of COVID, whether intentionally or not, that have led to disinformation. To segue away from the media and the social media, which we're all going to talk about, we can't discount the communities in which people live. We can't discount the religions or other secular groups of folks that influence groups of people and I think there is definitely a burden on the leaders of those groups to provide appropriate and factually accurate information. And then there's anecdotal evidence from individuals who may've had negative effects from a vaccine or after a vaccination that were completely unrelated to the vaccine but which were attributed to the vaccines.

So, what I'm saying here is that it's very easy to promulgate wrong facts and it's actually a little sad, at this point, that the bastions of healthcare in the United States and globally, the WHO, the CDC, the FDA are doubted by the populations of the U.S. and other countries in the world for the factual evidence that they produce. I mean, knowing the literature relatively well, and then seeing these hot pockets of disinformation and seeing how people handle the preponderance of the evidence versus these little hot beds of disinformation and how they grow and blossom relative to what's factually accurate is really pretty astounding to me, at this point.

Dr. Chapa:

For those of you just tuning in, you're listening to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Hector Chapa and today I'm speaking with Dr. Alex Pastuszak about fertility concerns and fears surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines. These are real issues.

So, Dr. Pastuszak, now we've talked about the vaccine, but I want to go in a different direction for just a minute. Let's talk about the disease itself, COVID-19. Can you tell us a little bit about how COVID-19 may or may not affect fertility?

Dr. Pastuszak:

Yeah, so Dr. Chapa, the jury is still out. And part of the reason the jury is still out is that there is not much data or data over a long enough period of time that, you know, allows us to really definitively say that COVID-19 has an impact on a patient's fertility. We do know that, for example, women who are pregnant or in early pregnancy have the potential to get worse COVID, right, that's not answering the question that you asked and we also know that in men the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been found in sperm or at least in the semen, again, association, I should say, not causal, and we've also seen in all of the vaccine clinical trials that have been done. I know I'm segueing a little bit into vaccine because this has been much better studied than the impact of COVID on actual patient fertility, we've seen that the impact of the vaccine on fertility is essentially non-existent in both men and women across large phase 2 to 3 trials. And we've also seen that in individuals who have and haven't been vaccinated in men that there's no changes in semen parameters. But again, this is time-boxed by two to three months of observation, right? There just hasn't been enough time to really see whether there's a true negative impact on fertility. So, while it's an outstanding question, right now there's also nothing to indicate that there is a long-standing, chronic negative effect on fertility.

Dr. Chapa:

So, give us some quick strategies that are practical to not just educate patients in a timely manner in a quick office visit, so, take away that fear and educate them, educate them at the same time. What's your strategy?

Dr. Pastuszak:

So, two main points there, Dr. Chapa. One is proactive address of any fertility concerns that people have. And two is I should say it slightly differently. Proactive address from my side meaning, I will proactively say that there's no definitive effect of COVID vaccines on fertility. Two is answering any questions that patients may have about the negative impact of COVID vaccines and really backing that up with facts that are easily digestible and understandable, right? I mean this is an mRNA vaccine that doesn't permanently get integrated into any nucleic acid that we have, that gets looked at by the cellular machinery and turned into a protein, which then gets picked up by the body's immune system. Simple as that, pretty much.

Dr. Pastuszak:

If you weight the set of alternate facts and the burden of proof that you need to factually demonstrate a negative effect, this just kind of falls apart. The set of alternative facts just fall apart. Graphene oxides in vaccines causing people to develop the symptoms of COVID, it

falls apart if you dig into it. Whereas, layer after layer after layer of actual studies done using the scientific method make that argument much stronger.

Dr. Chapa:

Now, as we come to the end, and this has really been helpful for me, even from a urology standpoint because I get the other part of that discussion with the OB/GYN, but please leave us with some clinical pearls, some final thoughts before we make the break from this program today.

Dr. Pastuszak:

Well, thank you Dr. Chapa and I would say I already let one of the cats out of the bag with regards to vaccine hesitancy, because I did want to call that out and call that out very strongly. And COVID is a perfect example of this because a lot of vaccine hesitancy comes from misinformation, which is more likely to occur when there are information gaps or unsettled science.

I think the other issue is thinking about the populations of people, say underserved populations or populations that may have a distrust of the healthcare establishment and I think that's actually increased, rather than decreased over time. And the work is being done, but we're calling it out in this discussion that we're having to build or rebuild trust with these communities so that they reengage with healthcare and are more willing to get it.

And the last point on social media being critical to disseminating information. Only recently the world realizing that for all of its benefits, social media does need to be very careful about how it manages information and disinformation. There's a growing burden on these companies to actually manage the type of information that gets presented to millions of people.

Dr. Chapa:

Well, I know for me, that has been great discussion. And it's helped me and it will help me in the rest of my clinical practice. So, considering that loss of fertility is one of the most common concerns that we hear from our patients and their hesitancy to receive this COVID-19 vaccine, I really do want to thank Dr. Alex Pastuszak for joining me here today to discuss these myths and fears and concerns regarding COVID-19 and fertility issues. Dr. Pastuszak, it was great speaking with you today.

Dr. Pastuszak:

Dr. Chapa, thank you so much. This was a fun discussion and it was a real pleasure to be here.

Announcer:

You've been listening to *VacciNation*, sponsored by Moderna. To access this episode and others from this series, visit ReachMD.com/vaccination, where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening.