

Pain in Breastfeeding

MotherSafe - Royal Hospital for Women

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Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your healthcare provider. Breast milk provides optimum nutrition for babies and conveys many additional health benefits to mother and baby.

What is Pain?

Pain may be described as acute (sudden and severe) such as pain caused by an injury or infection, or chronic (lasting for more than 3 months) such as pain from a medical illness like rheumatoid arthritis.¹ Women should be reassured that pain can be treated whilst breastfeeding and they do not need to suffer needlessly.¹

Whenever possible or suitable, treatment of pain without the use of medications should be tried first.²

Why treat?

Untreated pain can result in depression and anxiety which may affect the physical and mental health of the mother.¹ Women with continuing pain should seek medical advice about the best way to manage their pain whilst breastfeeding.¹

Paracetamol

Paracetamol is the medication most widely used by breastfeeding women to relieve pain or reduce fever.¹ Based on several studies, paracetamol in recommended doses does not appear to cause harm to breastfeeding infants.³

The recommended dose is 2 x 500 mg tablets or capsules every 4-6 hours (but no more than 8 x 500 mg tablets or capsules in 24 hours).⁴ Whilst taking regular paracetamol, you should not to take any other medicine containing paracetamol such as cold and flu tablets to ensure that you do not exceed the recommended daily dose.⁴

Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)

Anti-inflammatory medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, indomethacin and diclofenac help to decrease pain and swelling.^{1,4} In some patients, anti-inflammatory medicines may cause indigestion, heartburn, reflux, diarrhoea or abdominal pain so, if possible, these medicines should be taken with or soon after food.⁴

In recommended doses, anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen and diclofenac are considered safe to use whilst breastfeeding.¹ There is generally less safety data with other NSAIDs, so check with MotherSafe for specific medications.

Use of aspirin at doses greater than 150 mg per day is not recommended during breastfeeding.⁵

Opioids

Opioids such as codeine, oxycodone and morphine are stronger pain relieving medications used to treat moderate to severe pain.¹ Common side effects of opioids include dizziness, nausea and vomiting, confusion, constipation and drowsiness.⁴ Regular or long-term use of opioids may lead to these medications becoming less effective and dependency on opioids.¹

Taking any opioid can cause a breastfeeding mother to feel very sleepy so she should be very careful when handling her baby.⁴

The main concern about a breastfeeding mother taking any opioid is that it may cause the baby to be very sleepy and have trouble latching on, especially if the breastfed baby is premature or younger (less than 4 weeks old) or when the medication is used repeatedly at higher doses.^{2,4} This may be of particular concern when the mother has a history of sensitivity to codeine.^{1,2,3} If you are worried that your baby is very sleepy (more than usual), not feeding well, has trouble breathing or is limp, stop using opioid containing products and speak to your doctor.³

If women have continuing pain, they may also be prescribed different medications.¹ However, there is inadequate information about some pain medications to be able to be reassuring about use in breastfeeding. Contact MotherSafe for specific medications.

It is very important that you take the recommended dose and see your doctor if symptoms persist.

References

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4. South Eastern Sydney Local Health District. Pain Management after Childbirth. Consumer Information Leaflets, Royal Hospital for Women: March 2015. Available from: https://seslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/groups/Royal_Hospital_for_Women/docs/painafterchild.pdf Accessed: 7th October 2021.
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*NSW Medications in Pregnancy &
Breastfeeding Service*

For more information call MotherSafe: NSW Medications in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Service on 9382 6539 (Sydney Metropolitan Area) or 1800 647 848 (Non-Metropolitan Area) Monday –Friday 9am-5pm (excluding public holidays)