

Alcohol Consumption in Breastfeeding

MotherSafe - Royal Hospital for Women

Updated May 2022

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

Alcohol in breastfeeding

Alcohol in the bloodstream passes into breastmilk and reaches a concentration similar to the mother's blood level. It stays in the bloodstream for several hours. The level of alcohol in the milk will fall as the level of alcohol decreases in the mother's bloodstream. If there is still alcohol in a mother's bloodstream and breastmilk when baby is breastfed, this baby also drinks some of the alcohol that the mother has consumed. A baby cannot process alcohol in the same way as an adult: if a baby is exposed to alcohol in breastmilk, it may cause irritability, poor feeding and sleep disturbances.^{1,2,3}

The long-term effects of a mother's daily use of alcohol on the baby are unclear. Some evidence indicates that baby's growth and motor development may be negatively affected by one drink or more daily, but other studies have not confirmed these findings.⁴ A baby's brain continues to develop after birth and is more sensitive to damage than in an adult. This is more likely to be a concern with regular drinking.^{2,3,4}

It has also been reported that even relatively low levels of drinking may reduce the mother's milk supply. This can make a baby unsettled and feed poorly.^{1,2,3}

The current Australian guidelines recommend that for women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.^{2,3}

Practical Advice for breastfeeding mothers who choose to drink alcohol³

Women should avoid alcohol in the first month after delivery until breastfeeding is well established.

After that:

- alcohol intake should be limited to no more than two standard drinks a day
- women should avoid drinking immediately before breastfeeding
- women who wish to drink alcohol could consider expressing milk in advance so there is milk available if a feed is missed or while waiting for the level of alcohol in breastmilk to fall

It is not necessary to pump and discard breast milk, except for the mother's comfort when she is not feeding for an extended time. This is because pumping does not decrease the amount of alcohol in your breastmilk. Only time will reduce the alcohol in breastmilk.^{5,6}

As a guideline, it takes approximately 2 hours for the average woman to completely eliminate 1 standard alcoholic drink and therefore 4 hours for 2 drinks, 6 hours for 3 drinks, and so on.^{5,6}

***1 standard drink contains 10g alcohol. This approximates to 260mL of full strength beer= 475mL of light beer= 100mL wine= 30mL spirits**

References

1. Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Exposure to Psychotropic Medications and other substances during Pregnancy and Lactation. A Handbook for Health Care Providers. 2007
2. NHMRC 2020. Practical Information. How to apply the Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. Canberra: 2020. Available at <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/file/15922/download?token=ScCNn3nL>. Accessed May 2022
3. Australian Government Department of Health. Alcohol during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Available at <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/alcohol/alcohol-throughout-life/alcohol-during-pregnancy-and-breastfeeding> last update 08 December 2020. Accessed May 2022
4. Lactmed; Drug and Lactation Database. National Library of Medicine. Alcohol. Updated January 2022. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK501469/>. Accessed May 2022
5. Giglia RC & Binns CW. Alcohol and Lactation: a systematic review. Nutrition and Dietetics 2006 63:103-116
6. Australian Breastfeeding Association. Alcohol and Breastfeeding. September 2018. Available at <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bf-info/safe-when-breastfeeding/alcohol-and-breastfeeding>. Accessed May 2022

Other resources

[Feed Safe app](#) for iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch and Android devices (a collaboration between ABA, Reach Health Promotion Innovations and Curtin University).

Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) Breastfeeding Helpline on 1800 686268 -24 hours a day, 7 days a week



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)