



NSW Medications in Pregnancy & Breastfeeding Service



Caffeine and Pregnancy

Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your health care provider. With every pregnancy there is a 3 to 5% risk of having a baby with a birth defect.

What is caffeine?

Caffeine is a widely consumed, naturally occurring substance derived from the leaves, seeds and fruits of a range of plants. It is found in varying amounts in coffee, tea, chocolate drinks, cola drinks, energy drinks, guarana and chocolate. It is also found in some prescription and over the counter medications.¹ This can include medications for colds, pain relief, migraines and medications for increasing alertness. It can also be an ingredient of some herbal preparations, appetite suppressants and weight loss products. Caffeine is well known to have a stimulant effect- small amounts can increase alertness but larger quantities are associated with anxiety, restlessness and sleeping difficulties².

Issues for pregnancy

Due to current limitations in scientific research, it is difficult to determine whether a mother's caffeine intake in pregnancy is associated with problems for the baby during and after pregnancy. What is known is that caffeine does pass from mother to baby across the placenta during pregnancy and in breastmilk after birth. Unborn babies are less able to break down caffeine than adults. This means that babies may be exposed to the same stimulant effect as their mum.

Overall it appears that low to moderate caffeine intake does not make it harder to conceive a baby, nor does it increase the risk of miscarriage. However, higher levels of caffeine intake (greater than 300mg per day) maybe associated with decreasing the chances of becoming pregnant and increasing miscarriage rates². Recently there has been some evidence that moderate levels of caffeine intake **may** be associated with babies being smaller during the pregnancy and weighing less at birth². This can be a concern as smaller babies are at increased risk of having medical problems at birth and may be more likely to have long term health issues.

There is no association between caffeine and birth defects and there is no evidence for long term effects on children in terms of behaviour and development.²

Recommendations for pregnancy

In view of current knowledge, small amounts of caffeine are considered safe in pregnancy. The recommended limit in Australia is a maximum of 200mg caffeine per day. This would be equivalent to 1 cup of strong espresso style coffee, 3 cups of instant coffee, 4 cups of medium strength tea, 4 cups of cocoa or hot chocolate or 4 cans of cola.³ These amounts are estimates because the amount of caffeine in coffee particularly, varies widely. It is preferable to avoid double shots of espresso coffee and drinks which are marketed as sports and energy drinks as

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they have high levels of caffeine. If you choose to drink highly caffeinated drinks such as these, you should limit yourself to one drink a day and have no other caffeine intake that day.

In general decaffeinated drinks are a better alternative. It is recommended during your pregnancy to drink enough water, milk and juice in preference to consuming caffeinated beverages.

Similarly, if you take medication that contains caffeine, whether it is prescription or over the counter, you should take this into account when considering your total caffeine intake and the recommended limits. If you are unable to determine the amount of caffeine in a herbal remedy, you should consult with your health care provider before taking.

Breastfeeding

Caffeine readily passes into breast milk. Newborn babies until about 4 months of age are less able to breakdown caffeine and it accumulates in their bloodstream. This may make a baby unsettled and irritable. As a result, it is preferable to limit your caffeine intake and consume other fluids in preference such as water, milk and juice. This means coffee and all other drinks containing caffeine should be consumed in moderation particularly in your baby's first few months of life.⁴ Smoking cigarettes adds to the effects of caffeine on a breastfed baby. If you smoke, it is advisable to even further limit your intake of food and drinks containing caffeine.⁵

References

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3. NSW Food Authority. Pregnancy and Food Safety. Available from <http://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/foodsafetyandyou/life-events-and-food/pregnancy/pregnancy-and-food-safety>
4. Queensland Health. Healthy eating for breastfeeding mothers. Available from http://www.health.qld.gov.au/nutrition/resources/antenatal_brstfd.pdf
5. Australian Government, NHMRC. Eat for Health, Infant feeding Guidelines , information for health workers 2012. Available from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/n56_infant_feeding_guidelines.pdf

Additional information

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Australian Government Department of health. Healthy Active-Pregnant Women. Available from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/n55h_healthy_eating_during_pregnancy.pdf

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