



# Keeping Breast Milk Safe & Healthy

## KEY POINTS:

- Breast milk is the best food for babies in the first year of life. It helps your baby grow healthy and strong.
- Eat healthy foods and take a multivitamin or prenatal vitamin each day to make sure your breast milk is full of nutrients for your baby.
- You can pass harmful things, like alcohol, drugs and lead, to your baby in breast milk. This can cause serious problems for your baby.
- Don't smoke, drink alcohol or use harmful drugs when you're breastfeeding.
- Talk to your health care provider to make sure any medicine you take is safe for your baby during breastfeeding.

## Can what you eat and drink affect your breast milk?

Yes. Nutrients in foods and drinks help make your breast milk healthy. When you're breastfeeding, eat healthy foods, like fruits, vegetables, whole-grain breads and lean meats. Eat fewer sweets and salty snacks. You may need 250 to 300 extra calories a day when you're breastfeeding to make breast milk for your baby.

Drink lots of water. It's important to stay hydrated (have fluid in your body) when you're breastfeeding. Drink when you're thirsty. A simple way to make sure you drink enough water is to have a glass each time you breastfeed.

Limit caffeine when you're breastfeeding. Caffeine is a drug that's found in things like coffee, tea, soda, chocolate and some energy drinks and medicines. Too much caffeine in breast milk can make your baby fussy or have trouble sleeping. If you drink coffee, have no more than two cups a day while you're breastfeeding.

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## Do you need to take vitamins or supplements when you're breastfeeding?

Yes. Food is the best source of nutrients. But even if you eat healthy foods every day, you may not get all the nutrients you need. So you may need a little help from supplements. A supplement is a product you take to make up for certain nutrients that you don't get enough of in food. For example, you may take a vitamin supplement to help you get more vitamin B or C. Or you may take an iron or calcium supplement.

When you're breastfeeding, take a multivitamin every day or keep taking your prenatal vitamin. Don't take any vitamin or supplement without talking to your provider first.

### Here are some nutrients you may need supplements for during breastfeeding:

**DHA.** DHA stands for docosahexaenoic acid. It's a kind of fat (called omega-3 fatty acid) that helps with growth and development. If you're breastfeeding, you need 200 to 300 milligrams of DHA each day to help your baby's brain and eyes develop. You can get this amount from foods, like fish that are low in mercury, like herring, salmon, trout, anchovies and halibut. Or you can get it from foods that have DHA added to them, like orange juice, milk and eggs. If you don't get enough DHA from food, you can take a DHA supplement. It may be in your prenatal vitamin.

**Iodine.** When you're breastfeeding, you need 290 micrograms of iodine each day. Iodine in your breast milk helps your baby's body make thyroid hormones that help his bones and nerves develop. You may not get enough iodine from food you eat. And not all multivitamins and prenatal vitamins contain iodine. (Check labels)

You can get iodine by:

- Eating foods that are high in iodine, like fish, bread, cereal and milk products.
- Taking an iodine or iodide supplement. Iodide is a form of iodine.
- Using iodized salt. This is salt that has iodine added to it. Read the package label to make sure your salt is iodized.

**Vitamin B12.** Vitamin B12 in your breast milk supports your baby's brain development and helps him make healthy red blood cells. You can get vitamin B12 from foods, like meat, fish, eggs, milk and products made from milk. Or you may need a supplement. Ask your provider about taking a vitamin B12 supplement to make sure you and your baby get the right amount.

You may need extra vitamin B12 if you:

- Are a strict vegetarian or vegan. A vegetarian is someone who doesn't eat meat and mostly eat foods that come from plants. A vegan is someone who doesn't eat meat or anything made with animal products, like eggs or milk.
- Have had gastric bypass surgery. This is surgery on the stomach and intestines to help you lose weight.
- Have digestive conditions, like celiac disease or Crohn's disease. These conditions affect how your body digests (breaks down) food.

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Don't take herbal supplements, like ginkgo or St. John's wort, when you're breastfeeding. Even though herbs are natural, they may not be safe for your baby when taken in concentrated amounts. It's best not to use these products while you're breastfeeding unless your provider has checked them for safety.

### **Can smoking while breastfeeding hurt your baby?**

Yes. Don't smoke or use e-cigarettes ("vape") if you're breastfeeding. Nicotine is a drug found in cigarettes. It passes to your baby in breast milk and can cause problems, like:

- Making your baby fussy
- Making it hard for your baby to sleep
- Reducing your milk supply so your baby may not get all the milk he needs

Secondhand smoke also is bad for your baby. Secondhand smoke is smoke from someone else's cigarette, cigar or pipe. It can cause lung and breathing problems. Babies of mothers who smoke are more likely than babies of non-smokers to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (also called SIDS). SIDS is the unexplained death of a baby younger than 1 year old.

If you do smoke, it's OK to breastfeed. But smoke as little as possible and don't smoke around your baby.

### **Can you pass alcohol or street drugs to your baby through breast milk?**

Yes. Don't drink alcohol when you're breastfeeding. Alcohol includes beer, wine, wine coolers and liquor. After you ingest alcohol, it passes into your breast milk within 30-60 minutes at levels similar to those found in your bloodstream. Among women who drink heavily, alcohol levels are higher in their breast milk than in their blood.

Maternal alcohol consumption in various amounts has been shown to reduce milk flow and to cause side effects in babies such as slowed motor development, altered sleep-wake patterns and decreased milk intake. There is no known safe level of alcohol in breast milk.

Using low levels of alcohol during lactation does not mean you should stop breast feeding. Wait at least 2 hours after each drink before you breastfeed. If you have more than 1 drink in a couple hours, you should pump and dump/discard your milk before breastfeeding again.

You also can pass drugs, like heroin/narcotics, cocaine, and methamphetamine to your baby through breast milk. Tell your health care provider if you need help to quit using these drugs.

If you're breastfeeding, don't use marijuana. It's not safe for your baby. You will pass THC (the active substance that causes the "high") and other chemicals from marijuana to your baby through breast

milk. Because THC is stored in body fat, it stays in your body for a long time. A baby's brain and body are made with a lot of fat. Since your baby's brain and body may store THC for a long time, you should not use marijuana while you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Breast milk also contains a lot of fat. This means that "pumping and dumping" your breast milk may not work the same way it does with alcohol. Alcohol is not stored in fat so it leaves your body faster. If you breastfeed your baby and use marijuana, your baby may be at increased risk for problems with brain development. Marijuana also may affect the amount and quality of breast milk you make. Even if marijuana is legal to use in your state, don't use it when you're breastfeeding.

Because CBD (cannabidiol, derived from marijuana and hemp) is an unregulated substance, using it while breastfeeding (either in edibles or on the skin in oils, lotions, etc) is NOT recommended. Use of CBD products may expose your baby to contaminants like THC and other chemicals used in growing and processing the hemp or marijuana.

### **Are prescription medicines safe to take when you're breastfeeding?**

Some are, and some aren't. A prescription medicine (drug) is one your provider says you can take to treat a health condition. Some prescription drugs, like medicine to help you sleep, some painkillers and drugs used to treat cancer or migraine headaches, aren't safe to take while breastfeeding. Others, like certain kinds of birth control, may affect the amount of breast milk you make. Some prescription medications are safer taken in pregnancy than they are when breastfeeding.

Here's what you can do to make sure prescription medicine you take is safe for your baby when you're breastfeeding:

- Talk to your health care provider and your baby's provider about breastfeeding before your baby is born. Tell each provider about any medicine you take. If you take a medicine that's not safe for your baby, your provider may switch you to a safer one. Don't start or stop taking any medicine during breastfeeding without talking to your providers first.
- Make sure any provider who prescribes you medicine knows that you're breastfeeding. Check with your provider even if you take medicine that's usually prescribed for your baby, like baby aspirin.
- Tell your baby's provider if your baby has any signs that may be a reaction to your medicine, like diarrhea, sleepiness, a change in eating or crying more than usual.

If you have a chronic health condition and you plan to breastfeed, talk to your providers about how your condition affects breastfeeding. You most likely can breastfeed even with a chronic health condition. Your provider can help you make sure that any medicine you take is safe for your baby. A chronic health condition is one that lasts for 1 year or more. It needs ongoing medical care and can limit a person's usual activities and affect daily life. Examples are diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and depression. Chronic health conditions need treatment from a health care provider.

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## Is it safe to take prescription opioids when you're breastfeeding?

Prescription opioids are painkillers your provider may prescribe if you've been injured or had surgery or dental work. They're sometimes used to treat a cough or diarrhea. If you had a lot of stitches or a cesarean birth (also called a c-section), your provider may prescribe an opioid to help relieve your pain.

Opioid use during pregnancy is the most common cause of neonatal abstinence syndrome (also called NAS). NAS is a group of conditions caused when a baby withdraws from certain drugs she's exposed to in the womb before birth. If your baby has NAS, breastfeeding may help make her symptoms less severe. This may help her need less medicine and be able to leave the hospital sooner. If your baby has NAS, talk to your provider and your baby's provider about breastfeeding and how to make sure it's safe for your baby.

If you're using prescription opioids with your provider's supervision, you can breastfeed depending on the opioid you take. Some opioids can cause life-threatening problems for your baby. Make sure the provider who prescribes you the opioid knows you're breastfeeding, and take the medicine exactly as our provider tells you to.

If you take any of these opioids, talk to your provider about switching to a safer medicine:

- Codeine or medicines that contain codeine
- Meperidine
- Tramadol

If you're breastfeeding and taking tramadol, codeine or medicines that contain codeine, call your baby's provider or emergency services (911) right away if your baby:

- Is sleepier than usual. Breastfed babies usually eat every 2 to 3 hours and shouldn't sleep more than 4 hours at a time.
- Is limp
- Has trouble breathing
- Has trouble breastfeeding

If you're in treatment for opioid use disorder with medicines like methadone or buprenorphine (also called medication-assisted therapy or MAT), you can breastfeed your baby if:

- Your health is stable and you're no longer misusing opioids or using other drugs, like cocaine, meth or marijuana.
- You don't have HIV. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS
- Your treatment is closely supervised and monitored.
- You have social support from friends and family throughout your treatment.
- Your baby continues to gain weight as you breastfeed.

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## Are over-the-counter medicines safe to take when you're breastfeeding?

Most over-the-counter (also called OTC) medicine, like pain relievers and cold medicine, are OK to take when you're breastfeeding. For example, OTC pain relievers like ibuprofen (Advil®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®) are safe to use when breastfeeding.

Here's what you can do to help make sure an OTC medicine is safe for your baby:

- Don't take an OTC medicine during breastfeeding without talking to your provider first. If you take a medicine that's not safe for your baby, your provider can recommend a safer one.
- Read the label on the package for information about how an OTC drug may affect breastfeeding.
- Take the smallest dose (amount) of medicine to help lessen the amount that gets passed to your baby in breast milk.
- Don't take medicine that is extra-strength, long-acting (you take it just once or twice a day) or multi-symptom (treats more than one symptom). These medicines may have larger doses that stay in your body and breast milk longer than medicines with smaller doses.
- Tell your baby's provider if your baby has signs of reaction, like diarrhea, sleepiness, a change in eating, or crying more than usual.

## What medical conditions make breastfeeding unsafe for your baby?

Breastfeeding may be harmful to a baby if:

- You have HIV. You can pass HIV to your baby through breast milk.
- You have cancer and are getting treated with medicine or radiation.
- You have human T-cell lymphotropic virus. This is a virus that can cause blood cancer and nerve problems.
- You have untreated, active tuberculosis. This is an infection that mainly affects the lungs.
- Your baby has galactosemia. Babies with this genetic condition can't digest the sugar in breast milk (or any kind of milk). They can have brain damage or even die if they eat or drink breast milk, milk or anything made with milk. Babies with galactosemia need to eat a special formula that is not made with milk of any kind. Your baby gets tested for this condition soon after birth as part of newborn screening.
- If you've had breast surgery or piercing, it's most likely safe to breastfeed. Breast surgery includes getting implants, having a breast reduction or having a lump removed. Piercing means inserting jewelry into the breast, including nipple piercing. If you've had surgery or piercing, talk to your provider or lactation consultant. A lactation consultant is a person with special training in helping women breastfeed.

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### **If you've been exposed to lead, is it safe to breastfeed?**

It depends on the amount of lead you have in your body. Lead is a metal that comes from the ground, but it can be in the air, water and food. You can't see, smell or taste it. High levels of lead in your body (called lead poisoning) can cause serious health problems.

If you think you've been exposed to lead and are breastfeeding or planning to breastfeed, tell your provider. She can test your lead levels to see if breastfeeding is safe for your baby. If you have more than 40 micrograms/dL of lead in your system, it's not safe to breastfeed. Pump your breast milk and throw it out until your lead levels are safe.

#### **More information:**

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- La Leche League International
- International Lactation Consultant Association
- [womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding](https://www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding)

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