

Specialist services for women with problem drug or alcohol use - advice on safe breastfeeding

This leaflet offers advice on breastfeeding safely for women who have drug and/or alcohol dependency issues.

Breastfeeding has many health benefits for mother and baby, but mothers who take drugs or use alcohol need some extra information to help them decide how to feed their baby safely. You can talk to your midwife about this.

Most drugs that you take will pass into your breast milk and to your baby. The amount that goes into your milk depends on how soon after taking the substance or medication you feed your baby. The effect the drugs have on your baby, both physically and mentally may be the same effects the drugs have on you.

All drugs become poisonous in high enough doses:

- Heroin is an opium-based drug and a sedative that depresses the central nervous system and can cause your baby to have problems with breathing. As well as the risks with sedatives, heroin usually has other unknown substances mixed with it which may be extremely hazardous to you and your baby.
- Alcohol passes into breast milk reaching similar levels to your blood alcohol level. Drinking more than 2 units a day will make your baby drowsy and can affect development or make your baby very unwell. The level of alcohol peaks between 30-90 minutes after a drink, so it is better to avoid breastfeeding for 2 – 3 hours after drinking. There is no need to discard breast milk after drinking as when your blood level falls it will fall in the breast milk also. If however you drink either throughout the day, or have a 'heavy session' it is better not to breastfeed that day, but express and discard to avoid engorgement and maintain your supply
- Methadone is an opium-type drug. It does reach the breast milk in small quantities. The paediatricians (doctor specialising in the care of children) in this unit support breastfeeding with any dose of methadone. Recent research suggests that breastfeeding may reduce the risk of the baby having withdrawal symptoms from methadone.
- Subutex (Buprenorphine) has not been found to be a problem for breastfeeding babies.

- Cocaine/Crack is a stimulant. Cocaine and crack have a toxic effect and can cause your baby to cry and be irritable, can affect their feeding and cause the baby to be seriously unwell. It has caused many adult deaths. As with many drugs, we would also be concerned about your health.
- Cannabis may have no physical effects on your baby but as it is often taken with tobacco, this will be a health risk for you and your baby. There are potential health risks for your baby in the future.
- Drugs, such as ecstasy, ketamine etc, often contain stimulants. There is little information about their effects on breastfeeding as they are quite new but stimulants are known to be hazardous to babies.
- Codeine: please see the separate leaflet for mothers who are taking codeine regularly and want to breastfeed

When you buy illegal drugs you have no guarantee of the contents of those drugs, so it is impossible to tell if any of them are safe but the benefits of breastfeeding may still outweigh these risks.

If you take drugs other than those you have told us about, they may be harmful or even life-threatening for your baby, so please let us know.

Never give any prescribed drugs, street drugs or alcohol to babies or children. Any drugs should be stored safely out of reach. If you are on a methadone or subutex regime a lockable storage box may be available for you free of charge.

Please seek medical advice from your GP, midwife or health visitor if you are breastfeeding and you are concerned that your baby is being exposed to a harmful level of drugs, or you are concerned that your baby may be having withdrawal symptoms because you are reducing your drug use or you are cutting down your breastfeeding.

If you think your baby is ill due to the effects of drugs you should take your baby to A&E or ring 999 for an ambulance.

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

J Pendennis (Specialist midwife), September 2005

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