

Medicines and breastfeeding

The Health Column

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The first week of August is World Breastfeeding Week. This year's theme is Breastfeeding: a key to sustainable development. This theme is about how breastfeeding is a key element in getting us to think about how to value our wellbeing from the start of life, how to respect each other and care for the world we share.

Australia's Health 2012 statistics showed that although most babies (96%) in Australia in 2010 were initially breastfed only 39% were exclusively breastfed to around 4 months; and only 15% were breastfed to the recommended 6 months.



Exclusive breastfeeding means the child receives only breast milk (including expressed milk) and no other fluids or food (with the exception of vitamins, minerals and medicines where necessary). The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) dietary guidelines recommend exclusive breastfeeding of infants until six months of age, with combined solid food and breastfeeding until 12 months of age. Breastfeeding confers benefits for both breastfed babies and breastfeeding mothers. Let's consider taking medicines when breastfeeding.

Medicines can be defined as either prescription (only available with a prescription from a healthcare professional such as a doctor), over-the-counter (available without a prescription, often from a pharmacy) and complementary (e.g. herbal, natural and alternative medicines). Most medicines pass into breast milk but usually only in very small quantities. These quantities are generally too small to be harmful to the baby.

Many women will take some kind of medicine when breastfeeding. Some breastfeeding mothers may need to take medicine regularly to treat a medical condition. Others may take medicine occasionally when required to treat a sudden, limiting condition such as a headache, cough or cold. It is important when using any medicine while breastfeeding to consider the benefits to the mother compared with any risk it may pose to the baby. Discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist.

Before taking any of these medicines, ask the pharmacist if they are safe to take while breastfeeding and confirm the correct dose. Check the active ingredients as the type and strength may differ between brands and you don't want to take more than is required. If you are unsure, always check with the pharmacist. Medicines such as simple pain relievers (e.g. paracetamol and ibuprofen) are safe to take by breastfeeding mothers in the lowest recommended dose.

Many cough and cold medicines contain a combination of ingredients to treat the symptoms of coughs and colds. Some of the active ingredients in these preparations may interfere with the mother's ability to make milk (e.g. oral decongestants), or cause side effects in your baby (e.g. codeine, sedating antihistamines, or oral decongestants). Avoid cough and cold preparations that contain a combination of ingredients when breastfeeding. Instead, if needed, it is sometimes safer to use cough and cold preparations with only one active ingredient to treat a specific symptom of your cold. Other ways of relieving cough and cold symptoms that do not require taking medicines include resting, drinking plenty of water, gargling warm, salty water or drinking honey and lemon drinks.

Some medicines should not be taken when breastfeeding. Chemotherapy agents (drugs for cancer), ergotamine derivatives (e.g. bromocriptine), gold salts, iodine, amiodarone, radiopharmaceuticals (for nuclear medicine scans), and illegal or street drugs should not be taken when breastfeeding.

Your local pharmacy can help. Pharmacists can provide you with advice about taking medicines when breastfeeding. They may be able to suggest alternative ways of helping relieve troublesome symptoms such as using a nasal spray rather than taking a tablet. Always make your doctor and pharmacist aware that you are breastfeeding, if you are being prescribed or taking medicines.

Detailed information on medicines and breastfeeding is available from the Self Care Fact Card, *Medicines and breastfeeding*, which is available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. NPS MedicinesWise is a helpful consumer website that has information about medicines and breastfeeding. You can find this site at www.nps.org.au and search for breastfeeding.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772.

Remember; always talk to a pharmacist, doctor, or other health professional before taking any medicine when breastfeeding and take the exact dose prescribed.