Alcohol, Tobacco & Marijuana: What You Need To Know During Breastfeeding

By Beth Conover, APRN, CGC, MotherToBaby Nebraska

So…you were really good during your entire pregnancy, giving up every drop of alcohol, quitting smoking tobacco, and, of course, avoiding any drug like marijuana. You were concerned about the development of your baby, and doing everything you could to make a healthy outcome more likely. Good job! But now here you are….you've had your baby, you're giving breastfeeding your best shot…do you still need to be so careful? If you're wondering this, you're not alone. It is a top question I get as a health care provider and one of the top questions we get from moms through MotherToBaby's text information line. I'm a mom myself and after I had my boys, I asked the same things, like "would having a glass of wine when I'm on a date with my husband be the end of the world if I'm breastfeeding?"

Alas, many years later (and many published studies later), I have answers for you.

Let's start with the facts about breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is good for you and the baby, and you should continue nursing for at least 6 months… and better-yet, a year.

I think of alcohol and tobacco as 'recreational drugs' because there is not any medical reason to use them. And while medical use of marijuana is becoming more widespread, for most of us the use of marijuana is not medically necessary. We don't want rules surrounding the use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana to be unnecessarily strict so that they discourage nursing for the optimal amount of time. But we also want nursing moms to know that each of these drugs are passed to breast milk. Fortunately, there are often ways that we can limit the amount that baby gets.

Let's take a closer look at each one…

Alcohol—alcohol of all kinds (wine, beer, liquor) passes into your milk. Babies don't like the taste of it, and, if it happens often enough, babies may show developmental delays from exposures to alcohol through breast milk. Fortunately, waiting 2-3 hours after drinking a single alcoholic beverage results in lower amounts in milk. If you have two drinks, wait 4-6 hours…you get the idea. You can pump for comfort and to maintain your milk supply, but be sure to throw away the milk since it likely has alcohol in it. Chronic or heavy users of alcohol probably should not breastfeed.

Tobacco—you know that it is best for your health and that of your baby to avoid smoking tobacco, but if you cannot resist, keep the number of cigarettes as low as possible (preferably less than ½ pack per day) and never smoke around your baby. Nicotine gets into your milk, so try to wait several hours after you smoke before nursing your baby. Second hand smoke increases your baby's risk for ear and respiratory infections, asthma, and even sudden infant death syndrome. The immunoglobulins in your milk help to lessen those risks, which is why most experts still recommend breastfeeding even if a woman is smoking small amounts of tobacco.

Marijuana – THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, passes into breast milk. Marijuana production is not very well regulated, so there may be other dangerous contaminants. There are not many studies regarding use of marijuana and breastfeeding, but there are concerns that exposure to THC via milk might affect baby's development. It can also reduce your milk supply. Until more is known, it is recommended that marijuana be avoided in breastfeeding women, and that an effort also be made not to expose the infant to second hand marijuana smoke. If you happen to use marijuana, waiting 1-2 days before resuming nursing will help reduce the amount in milk. Pump and throw away milk in the meantime for comfort and to maintain your milk supply.

Bottom line, by breastfeeding, you're already taking the first step in providing continued important nutrition for your baby. Way to go! Taking steps to make sure your breastmilk stays as healthy as possible for the entire time you breastfeed will be well worth the effort. Stay strong, live well.



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