

For the Love of Cheese! Why Are Pregnant Women Told to Avoid Soft Cheese?

Cheese is as old as modern mankind, with clues about its existence reaching all the way back to 8,000 BC when the first sheep and goats were domesticated by our ancestors (www.historyofcheese.com). And since cheese has been around for so long, it is now one of the most popular and beloved foods throughout the world. So, it did not come as a surprise to me that many who are pregnant and breastfeeding ask MotherToBaby about eating cheese all the time! On our texting service alone (855-999-3525), we have received over 400 questions about cheese in the past few years!

Here are some of the recent questions we have received at MotherToBaby:

- “Am I allowed to eat cream cheese on toast?”
- “Is raw milk cheese from the USA OK?”
- “Can I eat goat cheese while breastfeeding?”
- “Is it OK to eat feta cheese during pregnancy?”
- “Can I continue to eat queso cheese on a burrito or nachos while pregnant?”
- “Is unpasteurized cheese OK to eat if it’s been cooked on a pizza?”

When you start researching cheese, you can fall into a rabbit hole on kinds of cheese: hard versus soft, pasteurized or not, Mexican versus Italian? The questions are endless. There are over 1800 different kinds of cheese, divided into 7 categories (www.funtrivia.com):

- Fresh Cheeses: Banon, Ricotta, Feta, Cottage cheese, Cream cheese, etc.
- Natural Rind: Sancerre, Chabichou, Crottin de Chavignol, etc.
- Soft White Cheese: Camembert, Brie, Chevre Log, etc.
- Semi-Soft: Edam, Pont L’Eveque, St Nectaire, Tomme de Savoie, Langres, Carre de L’Est, Epoisses, etc.

- Hard Cheeses: Cheddar, Parmigiano Reggiano, Gruyere, Manchego, etc.
- Blue Cheeses: Stilton, Roquefort, Gorgonzola, Maytag Blue, Cashel Blue, etc.
- Flavored Cheeses: Cornish Yarg, Gouda with Cumin, Stilton with Apricots, Devon Garland, etc.

So, what is the bottom line for you if you are pregnant or breastfeeding?

First, check to see if the cheese has been pasteurized or not. Look at the label and you will find that most types of packaged cheese or cheese products sold in America have been pasteurized or heat treated. Pasteurization is defined as a process in which both packaged and non-packaged foods (such as cheese and milk) are treated with moderate heat, usually up to 212 °F, to eliminate pathogens and extend shelf life. If the cheese has gone through pasteurization, then any increased risk for bacteria or other pathogens is very small, and the product isn't considered to increase risks if eaten during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Of course, keep an eye on the fresh or sell-by date, and keep the product properly refrigerated. Cheese that has not been pasteurized has an increased risk for bacteria such as Listeria. See our fact sheet at [Listeria Infection \(Listeriosis\) - MotherToBaby](#) for more information. If the cheese has not been pasteurized, but has been cooked or heated prior to eating, then there also is little increased risk. Plus, cheese that has been dried, such as parmesan cheese, has a longer shelf life and no known increased risk for bacteria.

One of the most common questions about cheese when pregnant and breastfeeding is about the difference between hard and soft cheese. Hard cheese has been ripened longer and is drier, having a lower water content. Whereas soft cheese is younger or fresher, with a higher moisture content. The higher moisture content in soft cheese can allow for more growth of bacteria. That is why it is a good idea to be sure that soft cheeses are either heated prior to eating or have been pasteurized at the time of production (again, pasteurization is a process to kill bacteria). Most soft cheeses in the U.S. have undergone this process by **FDA pasteurization law** — so look at the label to be sure and be aware of any possible increased risks if unpasteurized!

Cheese is rich in protein and minerals such as calcium and phosphorus. During pregnancy and while breastfeeding, cheese can be part of your good diet. Some cheese types, such as hard cheese, are higher in fat. So, do watch the fat content if cheese is part of your daily diet! Just follow a few simple rules about checking for pasteurization and being sure the cheese product is heated or has been cooked prior to eating if it was not pasteurized. And then, enjoy eating cheese without worry during pregnancy and breastfeeding! If you have any cheese related questions during pregnancy, or any other exposure questions, be sure to contact MotherToBaby! We will be happy to help you!

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“Sometimes I forget I am adopted,” exclaims my amazing son as he grabs his backpack to head off to college. I had just let him know that his birthday this year falls on National Adoption Day. “So cool! We will need to do something special this year on my birthday, to celebrate both my birthday and my adoption! See ya, mom!” To Shaun, adoption is as easy as one, two, three, and just a part of everyday life. As anyone who’s been through adoption knows, this is simply not the case much of the time. While adoption helped us complete our family, the process can be exciting, thrilling and scary all at the same time! When another woman is carrying the baby that will become your child, you worry. Was she drinking alcohol? Taking a pain killer? What if she was using illegal drugs?! It can literally lead to countless anxious days and sleepless nights. I understand these concerns as I shared the same worries.

National Adoption Day, started in the United States in 1999, is celebrated each year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. This year it happens to fall on Shaun’s birthday and reminds me of when we adopted him, many years ago. That time in my life was so powerful, but it was easier for me than it is for others as I was part of MotherToBaby and already knew where to find the answers to my pregnancy exposure questions.

My adoption journey has helped shape who I am today – a genetic counselor and a teratogen information expert who specializes in understanding exposures that can cause birth defects. The non-profit I work for provides this crucial service all across North America and I’m proud that my journey has brought me into a position to ease the minds of other prospective parents starting down the wonderful path of adoption. It reminds me of Austin and Drew, a prospective adoptive couple whom I helped in their adoption journey, “My partner and I did a lot of research as we started exploring adoption. After we started working with an agency, there were lots of questions about prenatal exposures, birth parent medical histories, etc. A lot of the information we found on these topics seemed to be contradictory and some of it was downright scary.” My job allows me to be on the other end of the line talking to this couple, and others like them, helping fill out intake forms and providing evidence-based answers to some of their questions. “Luckily for us, our adoption agency suggested we reach out to Lori. After our conversation we felt much more at ease, and we felt like we had the information we needed to make informed decisions.”

My own journey has come full circle, utilizing my training to help those going through what I went through years ago. MotherToBaby specialists are here to help you too! As Rory Hall, Executive Director of Adoption Advocates, states, “couples approach the adoption process with so many myths about prenatal exposures and health concerns that might affect a baby. MotherToBaby experts help them approach adoption with relevant, scientific backed information so they can make informed decisions about the children they are hoping to adopt.”

Just before Shaun shuts the door to drive to school, he pauses. Sometimes wise beyond his years, he turns and says,

“Mom, adoption is so wonderful because your birth parents gave you up so you could have a better life. Love you!” And just like that, the anxiety, and struggle during the adoption process go back to their place of being a very distant memory. #WorthIt.

More about National Adoption Day

National Adoption Day has been celebrated across the United States since 1999, helping to raise the awareness of the more than 100,000 children who are in foster care each year in the U.S. waiting for permanent families. For more information, see www.nationaladoptionday.org. And when you are going through your adoption journey, and have questions about exposures during pregnancy, contact an expert at MotherToBaby. You can reach us by phone at 866-626-6847 or by text at 855-999-3525.

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Being pregnant can be stressful enough without worrying all the time about things like “can I bake with poppy seeds?” Or “can I drink tea with peppermint?” Recently I had a caller tell me that “it seems like every time I turn around, there is something else that either I should not cook with or drink in a tea during pregnancy. What about when I am

breastfeeding? Help!” As a specialist who answers questions about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding, I hear these kinds of questions all the time.

Spices vs. Herbs

Let’s explore some of the spices and herbs that are not recommended for frequent use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Many of these items can be used in different ways, such as in baking, to flavor candy, as spices in foods, toppings on salads, or as part of herbal teas. To clarify, the difference between a spice and an herb is that herbs have to have a green leafy part and are mainly used for flavoring. They are also used as a garnish in cooking or salads. Spices, on the other hand, come from a variety of things such as dried roots, nuts, dried fruits and vegetables, or even from bark. Some spices are used for flavoring, while others are used as food preservatives or to give food color. If you use these herbs and spices once in a while as flavoring in your food and drinks, that is OK. The concern is when you consume these items every day or most days.

Poppy Seeds

Poppy seeds come from the poppy plant and are often used in foods such as bagels, pastries, cakes, and salad dressings. The seeds are washed and processed before use and eating small amounts now and then as part of a food dish or baked item is not known to be a risk during pregnancy or breastfeeding. However, the outer surface of the poppy seed does contain small amounts of morphine and other opiates such as codeine. When poppy seeds are used to make tea, the drugs can seep into the water when the seeds are soaked. Poppy seed tea should be avoided during pregnancy and breastfeeding for this reason.

Nutmeg

Who hasn’t had nutmeg floating on top of a latte or a cup of hot apple cider on a cold day in the winter? Nutmeg is a ground spice that comes from the seed of a dark-leaved evergreen tree. Nutmeg is also used in many different baked goods and with vegetables, specifically going well with squash dishes. Eating a little nutmeg as a spice in food does not have a known increased risk during pregnancy or breastfeeding. But high levels of nutmeg can also be used as a recreational drug as it contains myristicin, which has mind altering hallucinogenic effects. The myristicin isolated from nutmeg oil can be used to produce synthetic amphetamines. Also, in the past, nutmeg was used in folk medicine to induce abortion. Because of this, high level exposure should be avoided in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Peppermint

Peppermint use is a common question during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Peppermint is a popular herb used as flavoring in candy, chewing gum, desserts, and tea. Peppermint oil is also made from the leaves of the peppermint plant. The oil is widely used topically on the skin to treat headaches, muscle, and joint aches and pain, and in aromatherapy to treat coughs and colds. Peppermint oil can also be diluted with water and sprinkled around your house as an insect repellent too. So is this popular herbal product a risk during pregnancy? High levels of peppermint exposure during pregnancy can be a risk since it can relax the muscles of the uterus and increase the risk for miscarriage. For that reason, frequent use of peppermint oil on your skin (see our blog on [essential oils](#)) or drinking lots of peppermint tea is not advised during pregnancy.

Rosemary

One of my favorite herbs is rosemary! It is easy to grow and widely used as a seasoning in soups, salads, vegetable dishes, and with chicken and fish. Rosemary grows as a large evergreen shrub. The small evergreen “needles” are used in cooking, while the oil is used in folk medicine for digestive problems and to treat headaches. The concern comes when ingesting large amounts of rosemary, which can stimulate menstruation and increase the risk for miscarriage. Due to this reason, using rosemary for medicinal reasons or frequently on your skin is not advised during pregnancy. Rosemary also contains camphor. When taken orally in high amounts, camphor can act as a poison.

Garlic

Lastly, I want to talk about garlic, a favorite for many people. Is it an herb or a spice? Even though garlic is widely used as both an herb and a spice, it is really a root vegetable. I still want to include it in this blog due to its widespread use as a spice. Garlic is popular in pasta dishes, in garlic butter and on garlic toast, and in many dishes such as stews and soups! Additionally, garlic is high in vitamins B6 and C and is also high in calcium, so it's often taken as an oral supplement. Yet taking high levels of garlic can increase the risk for bleeding as garlic contains alliin, which acts as a blood thinner in our bodies. During pregnancy, this can lead to an increased risk for miscarriage. Avoiding high levels of garlic during pregnancy is advised. Even topical use of garlic on your skin is not advised as it can cause dermatitis and burns. When breastfeeding, eating garlic can change the taste of the milk and babies may not like it. Garlic use can also increase the chance for gas and colic in some babies.

Hopefully this blog has helped you make heads and tails out of using/eating/drinking these spices and herbs during pregnancy and breastfeeding. In general, with many spices and herbs, using a little bit to flavor your food usually does not have any known increased risks during pregnancy or breastfeeding. However, using the product in a tea or as an oral supplement is often not advised. We have a helpful fact sheet on **herbal supplements** that explains how little pregnancy safety data there is on most herbal supplements. Plus, these products are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for safe use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Any time you have questions or concerns about using spices and herbs during pregnancy, please contact us! One of our specialists will be happy to help you.

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“What products can I use on my skin during pregnancy and breastfeeding?” As a MotherToBaby information specialist answering our texting service, every day I get questions about any type of product you can think of that can be applied to your skin! Anything from itching and antibiotic creams, vitamin C products, essential oils, homeopathic creams and gels, acne products, to cosmetics and skin care products. Pregnancy and breastfeeding can be stressful times, and since we always want what is best for the baby, we all worry that a product we are using on our skin may get to the baby and be a problem. But is it true? What should you worry about and what can you use (as directed) without concerns?

Your Skin

First, let's talk about your skin and how topical products (things you put on your skin) get into your system. Your skin is a large, dynamic living tissue that is made up of different layers. We need to understand the absorption process in order to evaluate the safety of cosmetic, medicinal, and chemical products that come into contact with our skin. When a substance is put on your skin, it first has to go through the outer layer of the skin called the stratum corneum, which is made up of dead cells. Then come the living layers of our skin, the epidermis (waterproof barrier), dermis (connective tissue, hair follicles and sweat glands), hypodermis (fat and connective tissue) and the vascular network.

How Much is Absorbed?

Different factors affect skin absorption, including how much is applied, the physical state of the product (is it a liquid, powder, gel, etc.), where on the body it is applied, how large of an area the product is applied to, the person's age, and whether the skin is wet or dry at the time the product is applied. Often, only 1 or 2% of an applied dose is absorbed into your system. But sometimes, more is absorbed, especially if your skin has open wounds, cracks etc. or if you have a skin condition such as eczema. In fact, how “complete” your skin is can be the most important factor in determining how effective a barrier it can be to topical products.

It can be hard to get good safety information on every type of topical product. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) does require cosmetic products to be “safe,” which is based on their specific labeling and use. Yet cosmetic products do not need FDA approval to be sold on the market, and often the companies make claims that have not been studied and cannot be proven. So it is always a good idea to check with our MotherToBaby information specialists and let us research the product and its ingredients for you.

Many times during pregnancy and breastfeeding, people worry about the use of **retinoids** (a class of chemical compounds contained in treatments for acne, psoriasis, wrinkles, and other skin conditions), **high dose salicylic acid** (a common ingredient in topical acne treatments), **formaldehyde** (often used as a preservative in cosmetic products), **hydroquinone** (a skin-lightening agent that can be used to treat age spots and sun spots), and **chemical sunscreens** to name a few. These products do have some concerns and should be used with caution when pregnant and nursing.

Other products that are applied to your skin have less concerns in most instances. These include over-the-counter antibiotic creams, **corticosteroid creams** (used to reduce skin inflammation and irritation from things insect bites or poison oak/ivy, but also in treatments for eczema and psoriasis), **essential oils**, menthol and lidocaine type products (used in products to cool or numb the skin), hydrogen peroxide (used in treatments for acne, sun spots, and age spots), fluoride and **dental products**, homeopathic creams and gels, **vitamin C** products (used in treatments to reduce fine lines and as an antioxidant to protect the skin), and things that you put on your **hair and nails**.

So that is the skinny on skin care! You might be able to use more products on your skin than you thought you could during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Even with a product that is considered low risk, you may want to check with your healthcare provider or with us if you have any concerns before using. We have a number of **fact sheets** and **blogs** that can answer some of your questions about topical products, and our information specialists are always happy to answer your questions by phone, text, **email**, or chat.

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Holiday festivities sometimes include eating foods and drinks that might not be part of our everyday diet. During pregnancy and breastfeeding, we need to give a little more thought to what we should eat and drink. “Is it ok for the baby?” often goes through our minds during these times. As a teratogen information specialist at MotherToBaby who answers a lot of the questions we get via our texting service (855-999-3525), these types of questions ramp up during this time of year! So, here’s some insight...

Popular Holiday Food & Drinks

Eggnog & Other Holiday Beverages

Eggnog seems to be a part of many holiday parties. Always be sure to check if the eggnog is homemade or not. Does it contain raw eggs, which can carry bacteria such as **salmonella**? If the eggnog was commercially made and packaged, then usually the eggs have been pasteurized, and the product may even have been heated prior to packaging. Also, always remember to check if the eggnog contains a little “holiday cheer” (i.e., alcohol) or not. It is common to add rum to eggnog, and we want to avoid **alcohol** when pregnant or breastfeeding (see our **Alcohol Fact Sheet** for more info). Other common holiday beverages include mulled wine, wassail, hot buttered rum, and of course wine and champagne. All of these contain alcohol as well, so it is best to avoid them and just stick with mocktails and non-alcoholic punch.

Smoked Salmon & Fruit

“Smoked salmon tastes wonderful on crackers with cream cheese! But is it ok during pregnancy?” one woman texted me. Here’s what I told her. Smoked salmon is still considered **raw fish** as it is cured rather than cooked, so should be avoided during pregnancy due to the risk of foodborne illnesses. If the salmon has been heated to steaming, any concern for bacteria has been reduced. See our **Fact Sheet** on Eating Raw, Undercooked, or Cold Meats and Seafood for more info. Sometimes you will find foods that contain meats that have been dried, such as beef jerky. Although beef jerky is high in salt, there are not any other known risks to eating this tasty food during pregnancy.

“What about a fruit plate containing papaya and pineapple? Are there some worries about eating those fruits during pregnancy?” another texter wrote. Both fruits do contain enzymes that have been thought to induce labor. Papaya contains papain, while pineapple contains bromelain. Yet when eaten at normal levels (not daily!), these delicious fruits have not been shown to have any negative effect on a pregnancy. Of course, we hope the fruit has been **well-washed** before cutting and serving!

Eggplant Parmesan

“When the main dish is served, can we enjoy the amazing eggplant parmesan? Or what about eggplant ratatouille?” Eggplant is low in calories and high in fiber. Do avoid eating it raw, but cooked eggplant can be an occasional part of your diet. The concern is that eggplant is part of the Nightshade family and contains alkaloids in the leaves and tubers that can be toxic. But eating the fruit alone has not been shown to have any risks during pregnancy, especially when cooked.

Tiramisu

“Will rounding out our holiday meal with a delicious dessert such as tiramisu need to wait until after pregnancy and breastfeeding?” Traditional tiramisu contains two forms of alcohol, both Marsala wine and rum. Plus, liberal amounts of caffeine in the form of coffee and espresso. We have already mentioned that alcohol should be avoided if pregnant or breastfeeding, but what about the caffeine? Low to moderate levels of **caffeine use** (200 to 300 mg per day) has not

been shown to increase any risks during pregnancy. See our [Caffeine Fact Sheet](#) for more info.

Who knew that holiday menus could need extra thought and consideration during pregnancy and breastfeeding?! Plus, with the added stress of COVID-19 this year, and the warnings to avoid large gatherings, you may have even more questions now than ever. Hopefully, this information will equip you to sit back, relax, and enjoy the festivities!

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