Same Exposure, Different Story: Why Advice Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

You are pregnant. You ask, “Can I take my medication?” If you ever heard, ***“it depends…”,*** you are not alone. Things affect people differently.

So, what is going on?

This has to do with genetics. Genetics is the study of genes. Genes are a part of our DNA. Genes tell your cells what to do. Genes tell us how to process the world around us.

What Do We Mean by “Exposures”?

Anything that comes into contact with your body is an exposure. Food, drinks, and drugs are exposures. Getting sick is an exposure. Stress is an exposure too.

Exposure questions can feel like a lot!

Why Can the Same Exposure Affect People Differently?

People can have the exact same exposure. Their bodies might handle it differently. That is because of metabolization. Metabolization is how fast our bodies break down an exposure. This affects how long an exposure stays in your body.

Genes affect how your body breaks down something. Genes shape how the body responds to an exposure.

What Are Some Examples?

- **Caffeine and Pregnancy**

Let us say that you got coffee with a friend at 3:00 pm. You might fall asleep easily that night. Your friend might feel jittery after half a cup. You and your friend have different responses to the same amount of caffeine. That difference comes from your genetics. Your genes might metabolize caffeine faster. This is why you fell asleep easily. Your friend

might metabolize caffeine more slowly. This is why your friend felt jittery.

Genes affect how fast caffeine is broken down. This is why caffeine during pregnancy rules are careful. It is suggested that you get 200 mg of caffeine (or less) per day during pregnancy. The rules are there to protect those that process caffeine more slowly.

The end message? There are rules about pregnancy. These rules are broad. Your experience might be different than what the rules say. For more information on caffeine, click here:
https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/caffeine-pregnancy/

- **General Anesthesia and Breastfeeding**

Let us say that your dentist tells you to get your wisdom teeth removed. This is a surgery. For this, you will get general anesthesia. General anesthesia is a mix of medication. This is given so that you can fall asleep for a procedure.

General anesthesia is broken down fast. Your friend got her wisdom teeth removed last year. She woke up 2 minutes after her surgery was done. You woke up 5 minutes after your surgery was done.

It takes some time for you to feel normal after general anesthesia. You might feel a little loopy right after general anesthesia. Your friend felt normal about 1 hour after her surgery. You felt normal about 3 hours after your surgery. You and your friend react differently to general anesthesia.

Genes affect how fast something is broken down by the body. This is why the rules for getting general anesthesia while breastfeeding are careful. It is suggested to wait to breastfeed if you still feel loopy. This means waiting to breastfeed until you feel “back to normal.”

The end message? Everyone needs a different amount of time to break down general anesthesia. The best time to breastfeed is different for everyone. For more information on general anesthesia, click here:
https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/general-anesthesia-pregnancy/

What Does This Mean for Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Advice?

People are different. People have different genes. This means that people break down exposures in a different way.

Most recommendations try to:

- Lower the chance of any possible problems;
- Help people who might break things down more slowly;
- Balance safety with needs.

Final Thoughts

What happens to your body during pregnancy and breastfeeding can feel so hard. It can feel harder when your body reacts differently than what is expected. If you compare yourself to others, you should know you did nothing wrong. You did not need to know better. You did not fail.

You might feel overwhelmed or worried about an exposure. You might feel frustrated if you get advice that clashes. Talking to MotherToBaby can help you get information without judgment.



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Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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Same Exposure, Different Story: Why Advice Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

By Lorrie Harris-Sagaribay, MPH, President of OTIS/MotherToBaby, in partnership with Joanne Samuel Goldblum, CEO and founder of National Diaper Bank Network.

MotherToBaby is proud to partner with the National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) as the organization marks its 15th anniversary in 2026 – celebrating a decade and a half of supporting families across the country by ensuring access to diapers and other essential material needs. Through our partnership, we've learned that many parents and caregivers, especially those who are pregnant or caring for newborns, often ask the same kinds of questions about everyday exposures during pregnancy and lactation.

These concerns come straight from the field, as NDBN staff and volunteers working directly with families hear questions like these every day. To help answer them, MotherToBaby experts weigh in on some of the families' most common questions about pregnancy and breastfeeding exposures.

First, it's important to remember that birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. Pregnancy problems (like miscarriage) can also happen in any pregnancy. MotherToBaby looks at research studies to understand if a certain exposure could increase the chance of birth defects or other problems in a pregnancy.

Here are five of the exposures that NBDN families ask about most frequently:

1. Caffeine

During pregnancy, it's recommended to keep your caffeine intake to less than 200 milligrams (mg) per day from all sources, including coffee, tea, energy drinks, and chocolate. (For reference, an 8-ounce cup of brewed coffee can contain 70 to 140 mg of caffeine, depending on the type of coffee and how it is brewed.) During breastfeeding, it's been suggested to stay under 300 mg per day, although that amount might be too high when the baby is very young (it takes young babies much longer than adults to process, or metabolize, caffeine). Even some older babies can be more sensitive to caffeine than others are. If you notice that your baby seems jittery, irritable, or wide awake in the middle of the night after you drink caffeine, you could consider cutting back.

Let's talk more about ***energy drinks***. Most energy drinks contain not only caffeine, sugar, and B vitamins, but also herbal ingredients that most likely haven't been studied in pregnancy or breastfeeding. This means there is no information about how much of these ingredients might reach the developing baby during pregnancy or get into the breast milk. For this reason, it might be preferred to hold off on energy drinks until you aren't pregnant or breastfeeding any longer.

2. Over-the-Counter Pain Medications

Two of the most common over-the-counter pain medications are acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®) and ibuprofen (such as Advil®). These pain relievers are also found in multi-symptom products, such as cold medications. During pregnancy, using acetaminophen for a short time when directed by a healthcare provider to treat pain or fever has not been shown to increase pregnancy risks. Acetaminophen should be used as directed and only for as long as you need it to treat your condition. Ibuprofen, on the other hand, is typically not recommended in pregnancy, especially in the second half of pregnancy, unless your healthcare provider has specifically advised using it.

During breastfeeding though, acetaminophen and ibuprofen can both be used as directed without expected side effects for the baby. The amount of acetaminophen or ibuprofen that gets into the breast milk is much less than the dose that could be given directly to an infant.

3. Fish and Mercury

You might have heard a rumor that eating fish is not a good idea during pregnancy. But this is not the case. While it's true that most fish could contain some amount of mercury (or more specifically, a form of mercury called methylmercury), these amounts are often too small to increase pregnancy risks as long as you make thoughtful choices about eating fish.

The amount of methylmercury in fish gets higher as fish move up the food chain. Big predatory fish that eat smaller fish usually have higher levels of methylmercury. These big fish include swordfish, marlin, bigeye tuna, and king mackerel, among others. These fish should be avoided during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.

Other kinds of fish can be enjoyed in moderation (1 to 3 servings per week, depending on the kind of fish and where it is caught). The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) and United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed a helpful guide that lists many kinds of fish and gives advice on how often they can be eaten by women

who are pregnant or breastfeeding and by children ages 1-11 years: https://www.fda.gov/food/consumers/advice-about-eating-fish.

4. Cleaning Products

Is it better to use natural cleaning products like vinegar during pregnancy or while breastfeeding? What about when you have a young child in the home?

The way you use a cleaning product is usually more important than what the product is. Although using vinegar as a cleaner isn't expected to increase risks during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, there could be some surfaces or situations that require more effective products for sanitizing and disinfecting. In order for a chemical to be able to reach a developing baby during pregnancy or to get into the breast milk, the chemical first has to be circulating in your bloodstream. As long as a product is used in a well-ventilated area (open doors or windows, turn on fans) and your skin is protected from direct contact with the cleaner, then using the cleaner as directed is unlikely to result in an exposure that would get into your bloodstream. If you start to feel any symptoms, such as nausea, dizziness, or headache, increase ventilation in the area and get some fresh air. If you do use vinegar to clean, be sure not to mix it with ammonia or other chemicals, as that can create harmful fumes. With any cleaning product, follow the directions on the label for how to use and store it.

As far as what kinds of cleaners are preferred when you have young children in the home, that is a great question to talk about with your child's healthcare provider.

5. Animal Dander/Feces

Common household pets like dogs, cats, and rodents tend to be furry. Although pet dander itself is not known to be harmful during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, dander could increase the chance of breathing problems if you have significant allergies or asthma. If you are experiencing worsening symptoms of allergies or asthma during your pregnancy, be sure to talk about it with your healthcare provider. It's also a good idea to wash your hands after handling any kind of rodent, even sweet, furry, household pets.

What about animal feces? It's best to avoid direct contact with any animal feces during pregnancy. This means you get a free pass on cleaning the gerbil cage or scooping the litterbox, if possible. Cat feces, in particular, can contain a parasite responsible for an infection called toxoplasmosis, especially if the cat is allowed outside or is fed raw meat. A toxoplasmosis infection during pregnancy increases the chance of pregnancy complications, and could even pass to the fetus. There's no need to rehome your cat or avoid petting it, but you should avoid direct contact with the cat's feces while you are pregnant.

Closing Thoughts

Through our partnership with NDBN, MotherToBaby is committed to answering the real questions families are asking—accurately, clearly, and compassionately. We know that parents want the best for their babies, and they deserve trusted, evidence-based information to make informed choices.

If you or someone you know has questions about exposures while pregnant or breastfeeding, you can contact a MotherToBaby specialist for free and confidential information via phone, text, or chat at MotherToBaby.org.

Together with NDBN, we'll continue listening, learning, and supporting families when it matters most.

More About the National Diaper Bank Network

The National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) leads a nationwide movement dedicated to helping individuals, children and families access the basic necessities they require to thrive and reach their full potential...including clean, dry diapers, period supplies and other basic needs. Launched in 2011 with the support of founding sponsor Huggies®, NDBN is dedicated to creating awareness of diaper need/diaper insecurity and advocating for public policy to end it. The Network is made up of more than 300 basic needs banks serving local communities throughout the U.S. More information on NDBN and diaper need is available at nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org, and on Twitter (@DiaperNetwork), Instagram (@DiaperNetwork) and Facebook (facebook.com/NationalDiaperBankNetwork).

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Same Exposure, Different Story: Why Advice Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

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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Tanya called in on a Monday morning. “I’m getting married in a few months and we want to start trying to get pregnant right away. What should I be doing now to have the best chance of a healthy baby?”

Preconception health and pregnancy planning present a terrific opportunity to assess a wide range of factors that can give your baby the best start. This blog will outline the things to consider, as I relayed to Tanya:

Your Personal Health

Are you generally healthy? If you already get headaches or have acid reflux, know that pregnancy can make these more frequent. Ask your doctor if the way you treat these common conditions should change once you are pregnant. Ask about your current exercise routine and if you need to alter it during pregnancy. Get checked for sexually transmitted infections because some may not show symptoms. Also discuss your medications – some should be stopped before you start trying to conceive, such as Valproic acid, leflunomide (e.g. Arava®), teriflunomide (Aubagio®), methotrexate, and isotretinoin (e.g. Accutane®) to name just a few. For others, you'll want to weigh the risks vs. the benefits with your health provider before you conceive. Talk with your doctors now to make a plan.

Caffeine

Do you drink caffeinated coffee, tea, or soda? What about energy drinks, protein powders, or Kombucha? MotherToBaby's fact sheet on caffeine may put your mind at ease and encourage you to think about all your beverage options.

Body Weight

Is your weight a concern? One of the best things you can do before conception is to get to a healthy weight. Women who are overweight or obese have increased risks for miscarriage, birth defects, gestational diabetes, high blood pressure and preeclampsia, and unplanned cesarean birth. Now is a good time to meet with a nutritionist or go on a sensible diet to get to a healthy weight in anticipation of pregnancy. Once you are pregnant, continue to watch what you eat but don't try to lose weight. Weight gain is inevitable during pregnancy but guidelines from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (or ACOG, the leading professional society for OB/GYNs) advise women to gain anywhere from 11-40 pounds, depending on your pre-pregnancy weight. It's a myth that you need to "eat for two," so don't set yourself up for postpartum weight gain by eating more than you should. After delivery of an average 7-8 lb. baby, you may lose 2 lbs. in amniotic fluid, 1.5 lbs. of placenta, 5-7 lbs. in blood volume, and 2 lbs. as the uterus returns to its normal size. That could still leave you with 10 pounds of excess weight, or more if you gained more weight during the pregnancy. Some women never take off those extra pounds, and their weight creeps up with successive pregnancies and age, which can lead to pregnancy complications and chronic health problems later on. See our exercise fact sheet for more information.

Chronic Health Conditions

Do you have chronic health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, migraines, asthma, high cholesterol, heart conditions, varicose veins, or anemia? Do you have an autoimmune disease like Crohn's or ulcerative colitis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, multiple sclerosis, psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis? Meet with your obstetrician for a "preconception" appointment to discuss how a pregnancy might impact your health, and how your health might affect a future pregnancy. Your specialist can provide an important opinion too. A maternal-fetal medicine specialist (MFM) is a doctor who specializes in high-risk pregnancies, and consulting with a MFM once you are pregnant could help you learn how to optimize your and your baby's health.

Mental Health

What about your mental health? If you have a history of anxiety or depression, ADHD or other conditions, ask your psychiatrist and OB about treatment, and don't make changes before you do. Many medications can be continued during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. In fact, mental health is incredibly important – for example, when a woman doesn't treat her mood disorder or inadequately treats it, some studies suggest risks for miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, and preeclampsia. Talk therapy is vitally important too. And if you struggle with mental health concerns during the pregnancy, you are at risk for postpartum depression. Let's face it – pregnancy and caring for a new baby is stressful, so now is the time to marshal your helpers – friends, relatives, therapists and doctors – to ensure you have enough support. Your obstetrician should ask about mental health but if not, speak up. Your doctor can be your ally here, helping you get treatment and addressing concerns related to pregnancy and postpartum mental health. And MotherToBaby can give you an overview of the research related to any prescriptions you might choose to take.

Dental Health

Have you seen a dentist lately? Oral health can impact a pregnancy, meaning that if you have swollen or bleeding gums, a toothache or an infection, it can increase risks to the pregnancy. If you need to have a dental x-ray, take antibiotics, or have local anesthesia for a dental procedure, these are generally acceptable during pregnancy, but best to complete before you get pregnant. Contact MotherToBaby for more details.

Your Workplace

Where do you work? MotherToBaby can give you information to minimize exposures in a veterinarian office, dry cleaners, salon, laboratory/hospital, imaging center, pest control service, or other business. Your occupational safety department can recommend personal protective equipment (PPE) and tell you about ventilation that may be in place to ensure workplace safety. Safety data sheets (SDS) give an overview of chemicals used in industry and are available online or at work.

Food Safety

Read up on food safety and learn how to minimize your exposure to foods that have commonly been associated with foodborne illness such as E. coli or listeria. Get in the habit of washing your fresh fruits and vegetables well. Check out other blogs on our website too.

Vitamins and Supplements

Have you started taking a prenatal vitamin? Are you getting enough folic acid? ACOG recommends that women take at least 400 mcg of folic acid before getting pregnant and at least 600-800 mcg/day once they are pregnant. This can

help prevent birth defects of the brain and spinal cord. Call MotherToBaby if you want to learn the recommended daily intake for specific vitamins or minerals. In general, taking more than what is recommended is not advisable – we haven't studied how mega-doses of vitamins may impact a pregnancy. Other supplements beyond taking a prenatal vitamin are not advisable either – the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't supervise their manufacturing plants and past surveys have shown some supplements actually contain contaminants. Furthermore, we've seen instances where the label didn't match the contents of the bottle and could cause ill effects. Pregnant and breastfeeding women should avoid herbal supplements unless specifically recommended by your doctor.

Alcohol, Cannabis, and Tobacco

Do you smoke cigarettes? Do you use cannabis for medicinal or recreational purposes? Do you drink alcohol? Recent research has demonstrated that marijuana use very early in pregnancy causes changes in brain development, which could result in behavioral or learning challenges we see later in the child's life. Cigarettes increase risks for pregnancy loss, among other things. And alcohol is known to cause a variety of birth defects known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). We don't believe that there is a "safe" amount of alcohol which when consumed doesn't cause issues for a developing child. Now is the time to quit smoking, drinking, and using cannabis – your baby will be heathier for it. MotherToBaby can provide resources, or check with your doctor.

Vaccinations

Are you up to date on all your vaccines? Did you get a flu shot this past season? You don't want a vaccine-preventable illness to have an impact on your pregnancy. Flu infection can increase risks for more severe symptoms, longer-lasting illness, pregnancy loss and premature delivery, which can have a lifelong impact on your baby. Flu vaccine helps prevent infection. Another benefit to vaccinating during pregnancy? Studies show the protection extends to your baby, and gives them a little extra immunity from birth until they can receive vaccines. Also good to know: some vaccines can be given and are recommended during pregnancy, like a flu shot or TDAP, but others are best given before you conceive to avoid a small risk of spreading the illness to the fetus (e.g. the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, as well as the Varicella (chicken pox) vaccine) – so try to get these done at least a month before trying to conceive. Check your medical records to see the last time you received any of these vaccinations. If you don't know if you were previously vaccinated, your doctor can draw blood to check if you have immunity.

Your Pets

Do you have a cat? There is some concern in pregnancy about an infection called toxoplasmosis, which is caused by a parasite that can be found in cat feces. Read our blog for more info on what you can do to prevent this infection if you have a fur baby at home.

Other Illnesses

Do your upcoming travel plans involve travel to a warm tropical place? Check out our Zika fact sheet to learn more before you book nonrefundable tickets. In general, women will want to wait to try to conceive for eight weeks from the time of your return home; the wait time is three months if your male partner travels with you. COVID-19 is also

spreading around the globe and our fact sheet can give you the latest information on whether and how it could affect a pregnancy.

Finally, your obstetrician or primary care doctor would be glad to see you for a Preconception consultation. Make an appointment to discuss your personal history and health. It's a great way to get you and your baby off to the best start.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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Kombucha: fizzy, fermented, and full of probiotics. Some people drink kombucha for its fun effervescence and wide range of fruity flavors. Others, for its alleged health benefits ranging from improved digestion to lowered blood sugar. The increasing popularity of kombucha has not surprisingly led to an increased number of inquiries to MotherToBaby about the safety of drinking it during pregnancy. Carly, a recent visitor to our online chat service, explained that she had been drinking kombucha for years, but now that she was trying to get pregnant was it okay to keep drinking it? Great question! I'll share here what I talked about with Carly.

But first, what is kombucha? Kombucha is a sweetened green or black tea fermented with a symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast, otherwise known as a SCOBY. Symbiotic means that the bacteria and yeast work together in balance. If you've never seen a scoby, let me give you a visual: a pale, rubbery, gelatinous disk vaguely resembling some sort of extraterrestrial organ. Not something most people would find appetizing from the get-go! But once the scoby is added to sweetened tea and left to ferment for a period of weeks, the result is a tangy, bubbly beverage that is slightly alcoholic, which brings me to the first consideration I discussed with Carly about drinking kombucha in pregnancy.

Kombucha and Pregnancy

Alcohol

Kombucha contains alcohol as a natural by-product of the fermentation process. In the United States, beverages containing 0.5% or more alcohol by volume (ABV) are required to have a label that includes a health warning for pregnant women. Varieties with lower alcohol content (less than 0.5 % ABV) are not required to have the label. Nevertheless, the non-labeled varieties still contain alcohol. For non-pregnant women, these small amounts of alcohol do not have a known risk; but in pregnancy, the advice of major medical organizations is to avoid alcohol altogether. Especially since the alcohol content of kombucha is not always clear-cut.

Most of the time, the manufacturing process can stabilize kombucha after it is bottled. However, kombucha has been pulled from shelves in the past after it was discovered that fermentation in the bottle did not stop, increasing the alcohol content above the amount that would require the pregnancy-warning label. And determining the alcohol content of homebrewed kombucha is difficult. Homebrews can reach as high as 3% or more depending on the type of yeast used in the scoby, how long and at what temperature the tea ferments, and other factors.

The best way to avoid unnecessary alcohol exposure in pregnancy is to not drink kombucha for those 9 months. And what about during breastfeeding? If you do enjoy an “alcohol-free” kombucha from time to time, the small amount of alcohol it might contain is unlikely to have a negative effect on your infant. Yet waiting a couple of hours after drinking the kombucha before nursing again will allow time for your body to metabolize the alcohol from your blood and breast milk.

Bacteria

Another concern about drinking kombucha in pregnancy is the possibility of bacterial contamination. Using proper sterile techniques can reduce harmful bacteria in the product, but the best way to eliminate any bacteria that might grow during the long fermentation process is to pasteurize the beverage with a quick heat treatment before bottling. Kombucha purists may argue that pasteurization destroys the probiotics responsible for the health benefits that kombucha may provide. However, unpasteurized products are not recommended in pregnancy due to an increased chance of foodborne bacteria such as listeria and salmonella, which can cause pregnancy complications. Unpasteurized products to avoid include certain milk and dairy products, and yes, fermented foods and beverages such as kombucha.

Homemade fermented foods carry an even greater risk of growing foodborne bacteria since the sterilization methods used at commercial facilities are not available in one’s own kitchen. So when it comes to fermented products in pregnancy, store-bought selections that are pasteurized are the safest way to go. This means avoiding “raw” or unpasteurized kombucha, as well as homebrewed varieties.

Caffeine

A final consideration I discussed with Carly was caffeine. The general recommendation in pregnancy is to limit caffeine to about 200 milligrams (mg) per day. The caffeine content of kombucha can vary based on the type of tea used to

brew it, and may fall somewhere in the 15-130 mg range. When calculating how much caffeine you're taking in, consider all potential sources including coffee, tea, soft drinks, and chocolate. The MotherToBaby fact sheet on caffeine lists the amounts found in some common products, and can be helpful for tallying up your daily intake (be sure to also check your product labels). For example, if you already drink a cup or two of regular coffee in the morning, a bottle of kombucha might put you over the recommended amount of caffeine for the day.

If breastfeeding, keep in mind that caffeine passes into the breast milk and can cause some babies to be irritable or have trouble sleeping. While you might not need to avoid caffeine altogether while breastfeeding, limiting the amount you take in can up the chances of a good night's sleep for both you and baby.

In the end, Carly decided that foregoing her beloved brew for the duration of her future pregnancy would be in the best interest of her developing baby. In the meantime, she'll opt instead for water to stay well-hydrated, and for carbonated fruit spritzers and juices when she gets a craving for the uplifting fizz that kombucha provides. Cheers to that, Carly!

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