

Alcohol and Breastfeeding

Many breastfeeding mothers have questions about alcohol consumption.

Is it okay to drink alcohol while breastfeeding?

It is difficult to give a definitive answer about the safety of drinking alcohol while breastfeeding. This is because alcohol is a drug with potential negative side effects.

The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Drugs considers alcohol consumption compatible with breastfeeding, stating an occasional drink or regular light drinking (one or fewer drinks per day) has not been found to be harmful to the nursing baby. Moderation appears to be the key factor.

Does alcohol pass into the breast milk?

Yes. Alcohol passes freely in and out of your milk. Milk levels are found to peak 30-60 minutes after alcohol consumption on an empty stomach or 60-90 minutes when food has been eaten. It takes a 120-pound woman about 2-3 hours to eliminate one serving of beer or wine from her milk. The more alcohol consumed, the longer it takes for the body to reabsorb the alcohol from the breastmilk and filter it out of the body, just as it is filtered out of the bloodstream. If having a single drink, it may be wise to nurse right before consuming the drink. By the next feeding, the alcohol should be out of your milk.

How does alcohol in breastmilk impact babies?

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. One study has found that babies of mothers who consistently drank moderate to heavy amounts of alcohol (2 or more drinks per day) scored slightly lower on motor development at one year of age. Babies of mothers who abuse alcohol regularly can fail to gain weight at a normal rate. One reason for this may be that babies have been shown to drink smaller amounts from the breast shortly after their mothers consume alcohol.

What about a special occasion, like a wedding or birthday celebration?

If you find that you are going to have numerous drinks in a short time period, it would be wise to feed your baby milk that you have pumped previously during this time period. While you are waiting for the alcohol to clear out of your milk, you may want to “pump and dump” (pump and discard the milk) to avoid very full breasts and to maintain your milk supply.

A very conservative approach would be to “pump and dump” the number of drinks you consumed x 2 hours. For example: if you have 5 drinks between 6 and 10 pm, “pump and dump” for the next 10 hours, or until 8 am. **A more relaxed approach** would be to resume nursing once you are no longer feeling the effects of the alcohol as by then your milk levels should be quite low. In the meantime, you may need to “pump and dump” to avoid uncomfortable engorgement.

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