

All correspondence to:

The Breastfeeding Network
PO Box 11126, Paisley PA2 8YB
Admin Tel: 0844 412 0995
e-mail: admin@breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk
www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk

Alcohol and Breastfeeding

The information provided is taken from various reference sources. It is provided as a guideline. No responsibility can be taken by the author or the Breastfeeding Network for the way in which the information is used. Clinical decisions remain the responsibility of medical and breastfeeding practitioners. The data presented here is intended to provide some immediate information but cannot replace input from professionals.

Breastfeeding mothers can have occasional, small amounts of alcohol but should not drink regularly or heavily (e.g. binge drinking) without considering how to limit the baby's exposure.

- Alcohol passes freely into breastmilk reaching approximately maternal levels.
- Chronic exposure to more than 2 units per day may have an effect on development.
- Maternal blood levels have to reach 300mg/100ml before mild sedation is reached in the baby (this compares with a level of 80mg/100ml needed to fail the police breath test).
- Reduction of let-down is reported when the mother drinks heavily.
- Peak levels in the milk appear after 30-90 minutes.
- Excess levels of alcohol in milk may lead to drowsiness, deep sleep, weakness and decreased growth in the infant.
- To reduce exposure of the baby to alcohol, avoid breastfeeding for 2-3 hours after drinking.
- Chronic consumption of alcohol is more likely to cause harm than occasional social drinking.
- Alcohol may reduce the baby's sucking time at the breast but not the volume of milk consumed.
- Alcohol, particularly Guinness and stout, has in the past been recommended to increase milk production. This may be due to relaxation and increased fluid intake, as much as to any galactagogue properties. Non-alcoholic beers seem to have similar prolactin stimulating properties.
- It is not necessary to express breastmilk off to clear it of alcohol, as the mother's blood levels fall, the level of alcohol in the breastmilk will decrease.

To speak to a Breastfeeding Supporter call the National Breastfeeding Helpline 0300 100 0212

Calls to 0300 numbers cost no more than calls to UK numbers starting 01 and 02 and will be part of any inclusive minutes that apply to your provider and call package

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- Some mothers may need to express for comfort, to maintain their supply and to avoid blocked ducts or mastitis. It has to be acknowledged that if mothers have drunk a considerable quantity of alcohol they may not be in a position to consider this.
- If vomiting occurs as a result of too much alcohol breastfeeding should be avoided until the following morning.
- Mothers who have been drinking alcohol should never let themselves be in a situation where they might fall asleep with the baby; on a bed, chair or settee (this would also apply to other carers who have been drinking alcohol).
- Drinking alcohol reduces the ability of the mother to be aware of her baby's needs, whether she is breastfeeding or not. It is safest to ask someone else to care for the baby.

Other websites

- www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/board/life02breastfeeding1109.pdf
- www.eatwell.gov.uk/healthydiet/nutritionessentials/drinks/alcohol/
- <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/check-the-facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/fertility-and-pregnancy/alcohol-and-breastfeeding>
- www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/958.aspx?CategoryID=54&SubCategoryID=135
- www.maternal-and-early-years.org.uk/breastfeeding-and-alcohol

Guidelines from the Department of Health

Alcohol passes through to breastfed babies in very small amounts. It's unlikely that having an occasional drink will harm you or your baby, but it might affect how easily your baby feeds. So when breastfeeding, it's probably sensible to drink very little. For example no more than 1 or 2 units once or twice a week.

If you intend to drink more than this on a special occasion, you might want to think about expressing milk in advance for your babysitter.

It's not safe to get drunk when you are caring for your baby, whether he/she is breast or bottle fed. And when you have been drinking never share a bed, sofa or chair with your baby. If you fall asleep you could put your baby at risk.

One unit of alcohol is approximately a single measure (25ml) of spirits, half a pint of beer or half a standard (175ml) glass of wine - this may vary with the strength of the product.

www.nhs.uk/Planners/breastfeeding/Pages/breastfeeding-diet.aspx

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