

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. If you drink any alcohol DO NOT bed share with your baby or fall asleep in the sofa/chair. If you do binge drink, your baby should be cared for by an adult who has not had any alcohol. It is not necessary to express breastmilk to clear it of alcohol.

- Never share a bed or sofa with your baby if you have drunk any alcohol. Doing this has an increased association with sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- Alcohol passes freely into breastmilk reaching approximately maternal levels BUT 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 in England, Wales and N. Ireland; 50mg/100ml Scotland).
- To reduce exposure of the baby to alcohol, avoid breastfeeding for 2-3 hours after drinking.
- Peak levels in the milk appear after 30-90 minutes but this does not mean that social drinking of small amounts of alcohol mean that you cannot breastfeed.
- Excess levels of alcohol in milk may lead to drowsiness, deep sleep, weakness and decreased growth in the infant. Reduction of let-down is reported when the mother drinks heavily. Alcohol may reduce the baby's sucking time at the breast but not the volume of milk consumed.
- It is not necessary to express breastmilk to clear it of alcohol; as the mother's blood levels fall, the level of alcohol in the breastmilk will decrease.
- Binge drinking (more than 6 units of alcohol in one period), may make you less aware of your baby's needs. If you have drunk enough alcohol to make you feel disorientated or cause vomiting you should not be caring for your baby without supervision from a sober adult. You should ideally express for comfort and to maintain your supply – although this may be the last thing on your mind!
- Chronic consumption of alcohol is more likely to cause harm than occasional social drinking.

NB It is vital that 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). The place of sleep is a bigger risk than the fact that the mother has been drinking unless her consumption has been very high.

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.

To talk to a mum who knows about breastfeeding 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.

Other websites

NHS Breastfeeding and drinking alcohol. - Your pregnancy and baby guide
www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/breastfeeding-alcohol/

Guidelines from the NHS

- Anything you eat or drink while you're breastfeeding can find its way into your breast milk, and that includes alcohol.
- If you regularly drink as much as 14 units per week, it's best to spread your drinking evenly over 3 or more days.
- If you wish to cut down the amount you drink, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week.
- Fourteen units is equivalent to: 6 pints of average-strength beer, 10 small glasses of low-strength wine

Use Alcohol Change's alcohol calculator to check your units: <https://alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/interactive-tools/unit-calculator>

