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The safety of drugs passing to the baby through breastmilk – a summary

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.

- Most drugs pass into breastmilk – but generally in very small amounts (less than 1%)
- It is safe to continue breastfeeding when taking most medications. If insufficient information on any one drug is available, it may be possible to use a different one on which there is more information available instead.
- It can be difficult to find information on how much of a drug gets into breastmilk from commonly available medical texts.
- The age of the baby can be important when deciding if it is safe for a breastfeeding mother to take a medicine. A premature baby may not be able to deal with exposure to drugs which would be safer if given to a baby born at term. An older baby is likely to have efficient systems to detoxify any drug which reached it through its mother's breastmilk.
- The value of continued breastfeeding is generally more important than the need for a particular drug. There are exceptions such as treatment of maternal cancer.
- Alternative drugs may be available which are safe to take during breastfeeding. The mother may decide she would rather not take medication.
- If a drug is available in a formulation for children it is likely to be safe to be taken by a breastfeeding woman.
- Many drugs are unlicensed for use during lactation. This means that the manufacturers have not undertaken research to confirm safety on ethical grounds. Data may be available on the amount which gets into breastmilk. However the person recommending the drug e.g. GP has to take ultimate responsibility for prescribing should there be any adverse effects in the baby.

Bibliography

- British National Formulary
- Hale T. Medications in Mothers Milk 2014 (16th Ed)
- Jones W Breastfeeding and Medication 2013 Routledge
- Lactmed website <http://toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/cgi-bin/sis/htmlgen?LACT>

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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