Drinking alcohol while breastfeeding: Will it harm my baby?

Gideon Koren, MD, FRCP
January, 2002

ABSTRACT

QUESTION

I recently delivered a healthy, full-term baby and am now breastfeeding exclusively. I abstained from drinking alcohol during my entire pregnancy and am wondering if drinking alcohol now would harm my nursing baby.

ANSWER

Nursing mothers who choose to drink alcohol during the postpartum period should carefully plan a breastfeeding schedule by storing milk before drinking and waiting for complete elimination of alcohol from their breast milk after drinking. Motherisk has created an algorithm to estimate how long it takes to eliminate alcohol from breast milk.

QUESTION

J'ai récemment accouché à terme d'un enfant en santé que j'allaitais maintenant exclusivement. Je me suis abstenu de boire de l'alcool durant toute ma grossesse et je me demandais si la consommation d'alcool nuirait maintenant à l'enfant que j'allaitais.

RÉPONSE

Les mères qui allaitent et choisissent de boire de l'alcool après l'accouchement devraient soigneusement planifier une période d'arrêt de la consommation d'alcool avant de commencer à allaiter. Motherisk a produit un algorithme estimant la période requise pour éliminer l'alcool du lait maternel.

Ample evidence indicates that drinking alcohol during pregnancy poses a severe and avoidable risk to unborn babies. The risks of drinking alcohol while breastfeeding, however, are not well defined. Currently, some mothers are still advised by physicians, nurses, lactation consultants, family members, and friends that it is all right to drink, even though an acceptable level of alcohol in breast milk has never been established.

Alcohol consumed by a mother passes easily into her breast milk at concentrations similar to those found in her bloodstream. A nursing infant is actually exposed to only a fraction of the alcohol the mother ingests, but infants detoxify alcohol in their first weeks of life at only half the rate of adults. Several proven or potential adverse effects of alcohol on suckling infants have been reported, even after exposure to only moderate levels: impaired motor development, changes in sleep patterns, decrease in milk intake, and risk of hypoglycemia. In addition, drinking large amounts of alcohol could affect lactating women's milk flow.

Some report that beer aids milk production and that infants prefer alcohol-flavoured breast milk. Even though beer increases maternal milk production and alcohol enhances its flavour, evidence indicates that the presence of alcohol in breast milk has an overall effect of decreasing infant consumption by 23%. The underlying mechanism for this reduction is unknown.

At this time, there are no known benefits of exposing nursing infants to alcohol. Although occasional drinking while nursing has not been associated with overt harm to infants, the possibility of adverse effects has not been ruled out. Occasional drinking, however, does not warrant discontinuing breastfeeding, as the benefits of breastfeeding are extensive and well recognized. Until a safe level of alcohol in breast milk is established, no alcohol in breast milk is safest for nursing babies. It is, therefore, prudent for mothers to delay breastfeeding their babies until alcohol is completely cleared from their breast milk.

Previous guidelines for determining the time needed to eliminate alcohol from breast milk were rough estimates based on number of drinks consumed. By also taking into account mother’s weight, which affects milk-alcohol concentration, a more accurate estimate of how long a nursing mother should delay breastfeeding can be determined.

With pharmacokinetic modeling, the Motherisk team produced an algorithm to help breastfeeding mothers and their health care providers determine how long it takes to eliminate alcohol completely from breast milk. Time should be calculated from the beginning of drinking.

Because alcohol elimination follows zero-order kinetics, drinking water, resting, or "pumping and dumping" breast milk will not accelerate elimination. Unlike urine, which stores substances in the bladder, alcohol is not trapped in breast milk, but is constantly removed as it diffuses back into the bloodstream.

Mothers who choose to drink alcohol while breastfeeding should be aware of the documented effects on nursing infants. Carefully planning a breastfeeding schedule and waiting for complete alcohol clearance from breast milk can ensure that babies are not exposed to any alcohol.

Acknowledgment

Supported by the Brewers Association of Canada and the Fund for Research Leadership for Better Pharmacotherapy during Pregnancy & Breastfeeding

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8 May 2014
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7 Nov 2013
Motherisk publishes book to help women with morning sickness

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SEARCH MOTHERISK
Pregnancy and Lactation. Dr. Koren is a Senior Scientist of the Canadian Institutes for Health Research.

References


Table 1

Time from beginning of drinking until clearance of alcohol from breast milk for women of various body weights: Assuming alcohol metabolism is constant at 15 mg/dL and woman is of average height (1.62 m [5′4″]).

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*1 drink = 340 g (12 oz) of 5% beer, or 141.75 g (5 oz) of 11% wine, or 42.53 g (1.5 oz) of 40% liquor.

Example no. 1: For a 40.8-kg (90-lb) woman who consumed three drinks in 1 hour, it would take 8 hours, 30 minutes for there to be no alcohol in her breast milk, and for a 95.3-kg (210-lb) woman drinking the same amount, it would take 5 hours, 30 minutes.

Example no. 2: For a 63.5-kg (140-lb) woman drinking four beers starting at 8:00 pm, it would take 9 hours, 17 minutes for there to be no alcohol in her breast milk (ie, until 5:17 am)

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