

Question : I am a L&D nurse and get asked about drinking and breastfeeding. Exactly how much alcohol is excreted in the breast milk? It seems that even if your blood alcohol is .1%, that not even that much would be in the milk. Is it possible for there to be enough alcohol in the breast milk to intoxicate a baby? And how fast is it metabolized out of the milk?

Answer : It appears likely that alcohol, using this term in the generic sense, does get into the breast milk. Alcohol, however, is not stored in the breast and therefore, dependent on normal alcohol catabolic pathways that govern alcohol metabolism in general and mirrors the blood alcohol content. The percent alcohol of the beverage consumed, rate at which it is consumed, other activities (dancing, e.g.) during consumption, body weight and body mass index, and whether food and which types of food are consumed all have a potential impact. The American Academy of Pediatrics categorizes alcohol as "usually compatible with breast feeding". Binge drinking, however, is never encouraged among lactating women but should not be considered sufficient deterrent to discourage all forms of consumption or abstinence. Studies of breast milk production appear to be consistent and refute folklore that suggests alcohol consumption increases breast milk supply. Most forms of alcohol transiently decrease milk volume. Interestingly, beer increases breast milk production and this is thought to be an effect of polysaccharides found in barley and hops. Furthermore, infants seem to enjoy the taste of alcohol in breast milk. We suppose that it is possible for an infant to get intoxicated on breast milk but this will never be studied. Maternal drinking one alcoholic beverage (4 fluid ounces of 12% wine; 12 fluid ounces of 4.5% beer; 1 fluid ounce of 100 proof whiskey) is unlikely to cause either short-term or long-term health problems in the nursing infant. Heavy maternal drinking may cause sedation, fluid retention, and hormonal imbalances in breastfed infants. Although the risks of drinking alcohol while breast-feeding have not been well-defined, data seems to support that common sense and moderation can prevail.