

# The facts about Alcohol and Breastfeeding

## Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guideline for Breastfeeding

If you are breastfeeding, there will be alcohol in your breast milk after you drink. If you plan to drink alcohol, there are things you can do to make sure the alcohol doesn't reach your baby. For example, you can breastfeed right before you drink alcohol so the alcohol can leave your breast milk before your baby's next feed. Talk to your health care provider about how you can continue to breastfeed.

### Key Points

- Breastfeeding is normal. There is no better way to feed your baby.
- If you drink alcohol, there will be alcohol in your breast milk after you drink.
- It is safest to avoid alcohol for the first three months of your baby's life. This gives your baby's liver time to develop.
- When your baby is older than three months, follow Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines if you choose to drink alcohol.
- Breastfeed just **before** you drink alcohol.

### 1 It is safest to avoid alcohol in the first three months after birth.

If you drink alcohol, there will be alcohol in your breast milk after you drink. Alcohol has a greater effect on babies younger than three months of age because their livers are less developed.

Young babies breastfeed often and without any pattern. This makes it difficult to be sure there is no alcohol in your breast milk when your baby wants to feed.

### 2 The amount of alcohol in your blood is the amount of alcohol in your milk.

Alcohol gets into your breast milk from your blood. It moves freely from blood into breast milk and back out again.

Alcohol shows up in your breast milk almost right away, and is at the highest levels 30–60 minutes after you start drinking.

The amount of alcohol that gets into your breast milk depends on several things. These include:

- the strength and amount of alcohol in your drink
- what and how much you've eaten
- how much you weigh
- how quickly you are drinking.

### 3 Only time reduces the amount of alcohol in your breast milk.

As the amount of alcohol in your blood starts to drop, the amount in your milk will drop too.

As a general rule, it takes two hours for an average woman to get rid of the alcohol from one drink. It takes four hours for two drinks, six hours for three drinks, and so on.

As long as there is alcohol in your blood, there is alcohol in your breast milk. 'Pumping and

dumping'—expressing breast milk and throwing it away—does not reduce the amount of alcohol in your breast milk. As long as there is alcohol in your system, there is alcohol in the new milk your body makes to replace the milk you pumped out. Once the alcohol has passed through your system, it is gone from your milk, too. Alcohol is not 'stored' in your milk, just as it isn't stored in your blood.

### 4 If you plan to drink alcohol, there are things you can do to make sure the alcohol doesn't reach your baby.

- **Follow Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines: "The Limits"**

If you have 1 or 2 standard drinks in a day:

- Breastfeed your baby immediately **before** you drink. This allows time for the alcohol you drink to leave your breast milk before the next feeding.
- Eat before and while drinking.
- Have a non-alcoholic drink for every alcoholic drink. This will help reduce the amount of alcohol you drink.

- **Be aware that drinking 3 or more drinks a day can be harmful to your health and that of your baby.**

- You may not be able to take care of your baby properly if you are affected by alcohol.
- Alcohol may decrease the flow of your milk and reduce your supply.
- Your baby may be slower to reach developmental milestones.

#### *The Limits*

Over time, even moderate drinking can increase your risk of some chronic diseases, including high blood pressure, depression and many forms of cancer. To reduce your long-term health risks, follow these guidelines:

**Women:** 0 to 2 drinks a day, up to 10 drinks a week

Once in a while you might have an extra drink, but it's important to stay within the weekly limits.

Pick a couple of non-drinking days each week. This will help you to avoid developing a drinking habit.

## 5 Beer (or any other type of alcohol) will not improve your milk supply

Research has shown that alcohol does not increase milk supply.

## 6 If you have more to drink than planned

- Arrange for someone who isn't affected by alcohol to look after your baby.
- Don't sleep with your baby if you (or anyone else in the bed) are affected by alcohol.
- If you know that sometimes you drink more than you plan to, you can express some milk ahead of time just in case. The baby can have this milk if you miss a feeding while drinking, or while you are waiting for alcohol to leave your milk.
- If your breasts are uncomfortable because you have missed a feeding, express some milk and throw it away. This will help you feel more comfortable and will maintain your milk supply.

### *For more information...*

If you want more information, or if you need some extra support, talk to a health care provider. This could be your doctor or a nurse. You could also visit your local family resource center.

If you have concerns about how much you are drinking, contact your local Addiction Services office. To find the one nearest you, go to: <http://www.addictionservices.ns.ca/>

For more information on breastfeeding, please read *Breastfeeding Basics* and/or *Loving Care*. These are two publications produced by the Government of Nova Scotia. They can be found at: [http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/healthy\\_development/publications.asp](http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/healthy_development/publications.asp)