

Herbal and Traditional Medicines in Breastfeeding

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This fact sheet is for women who are concerned about the use of herbal and traditional medicines while breastfeeding.

What are herbal and traditional medicines?

Herbal and traditional medicines fall under the umbrella of complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs). They are products that are used based on traditional knowledge; this is why there is sometimes less scientific evidence available about their safety and effectiveness.

A survey conducted by the National Prescribing Service revealed that 65 per cent of Australians had used one or more complementary medicine in the previous 12 months.¹

Herbal and traditional medicines are generally bought from shops such as pharmacies, supermarkets and health food stores. While most complementary medicines are used for the relief of symptoms of minor and self-limiting conditions, many are used for maintaining health and well-being, or the promotion of health.²

Breastfeeding

Generally, it is recommended that you should avoid using herbal and traditional medicines because there is not a lot of safety information. Certain herbal and traditional medicines, like conventional medicines, can transfer into your breast milk. Some herbal and traditional medicines may be harmful to your baby, while others can affect your breast milk production.

Breast milk is the best nutrient for your baby. The health benefits are so important that you should only stop breastfeeding if there is a very important reason why you should not. You should be very careful about what herbal and traditional medicines you use while breastfeeding, especially when your baby is a newborn, or if your baby was born premature.

Things to consider before using herbal and traditional medicines

There are several concerns around the use of herbal and traditional medicines in breastfeeding.

- All herbal and traditional medicines have the potential to pass into breast milk and affect the baby.
- With most herbal and traditional medicines, there is not enough documented information to determine their safety in breastfeeding.
- Some herbal and traditional medicines have not been scientifically proven to be effective.
- Some herbal and traditional medicine products have not been regulated to ensure good quality.

Common herbal and traditional medicines used in breastfeeding

Aloe vera

Aloe vera gel is used to help heal cracked nipples. Remove aloe gel from the nipple areas before feeding your baby because the bitter taste of the aloe vera gel can affect feeding.

Aloe vera latex is a yellow-coloured liquid that comes from the inner skin of the aloe leaf. It is taken orally in both the dried and liquid form. Avoid taking aloe vera latex as it has a strong laxative effect.³⁻⁵

Black cohosh

Black cohosh should be avoided because there is no information about the safety of using this product while breastfeeding. There is a risk that it may reduce breast milk production because of the herbal medicine's hormonal effects.³⁻⁷

Chamomile

Chamomile is considered safe to use in weak concentrations, such as in tea, while breastfeeding. Chamomile tea or tincture is also used to calm an upset stomach and help with sleeping problems. Chamomile can also be found in skin products to treat dermatitis, wounds and other skin conditions.³⁻⁶

Cranberry

Cranberry may be used to prevent urinary tract infections in breastfeeding mothers. There is no information on the safety and efficacy of the medicine in breastfeeding, but is considered safe to use at the recommended doses.³⁻⁵

Echinacea

Echinacea has been commonly used to treat or prevent upper respiratory tract infections. There is no information about the safety and efficacy of echinacea in breastfeeding. Watch your baby for possible side effects, such as diarrhoea or constipation, poor feeding and skin rashes if you take echinacea while breastfeeding.³⁻⁷

Evening primrose oil

There is limited information about the use of evening primrose oil in breastfeeding mothers. It is generally recognised as safe to use during breastfeeding at the recommended doses.^{3,5,7}

Fenugreek

Traditionally, fenugreek is used to increase milk supply. The transfer of fenugreek into breast milk is unknown and unusual side effects such as allergy, colic, abdominal discomfort and diarrhoea have been reported in babies. Also, there is the potential for fenugreek to interact with other medicines. See your doctor or pharmacist for further advice.³⁻⁵

Fish Oil

Fish oil supplements are likely to be safe to use while breastfeeding at the recommended doses.^{5,6}

Flaxseed oil

Flaxseed oil is generally safe and well tolerated. Supplementation of flaxseed oil seems to improve omega-3 fatty acid in the breast milk.⁸ It may be used by breastfeeding mothers at the recommended doses. Avoid large doses of flaxseed oil as it may increase the risk of side effects such as diarrhoea.^{3,5,6,8}

Garlic

Garlic appears to be safe in amounts usually used in food preparation. Garlic may change the smell of breast milk and affect your baby's feeding. There is no information on the safety of garlic supplements in breastfeeding.^{3,5,6}

Ginger

Ginger appears to be safe in amounts usually used in food preparation. Avoid using large amounts as there is not enough information available about the safety of ginger while breastfeeding.^{3,5,6}

Ginkgo

Ginkgo should be avoided in breastfeeding women because there is very limited information about the use and safety of ginkgo products.^{3,5,6}

Ginseng

There is not a lot of information about the use and safety of ginseng in breastfeeding therefore it should be used with caution.^{3,5,6}

Glucosamine

No information is available about the use of glucosamine in breastfeeding. It is unlikely that glucosamine will transfer into the breast milk and affect your baby.³⁻⁵

Liquorice

Large amounts of liquorice or liquorice supplements should be avoided in breastfeeding mothers because there is limited safety information.^{3,5,6}

Lysine

Lysine is considered safe to use by breastfeeding mothers at the recommended doses.³

Milk thistle

Avoid using milk thistle because there is no information on the safety of this traditional medicine when used by breastfeeding mothers.^{3,5-7}

Raspberry leaf

When used as a tea, raspberry leaf is safe to use while breastfeeding. Raspberry leaf supplements should be avoided because there is limited safety information.^{3,5}

Spirulina

Spirulina should be avoided in breastfeeding women because there is very limited safety information. The spirulina product information indicates that it is suitable to take during breastfeeding, but consult your doctor or pharmacist before starting spirulina.⁹

St John's Wort

There is very little information available about the safety and efficacy of St John's Wort in breastfeeding women. It is recommended that an alternative medicine be considered. See your doctor or pharmacist for advice before starting St John's Wort.³⁻⁷

Valerian

There is very limited information about the use of valerian in breastfeeding. Avoid high doses of valerian as it may increase side effects such as drowsiness. An alternative should be considered; especially when your baby is a newborn or was born premature. See your doctor or pharmacist for advice before starting valerian.³⁻⁶

Where to get more information

Medicines Information Service

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Related fact sheets

- Medicines in breastfeeding
- Medicines in pregnancy
- Herbal and traditional medicines in breastfeeding

References:

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