

# Alcohol and breastfeeding:

## A guide for health professionals

### Key points

- Alcohol passes into breastmilk, and breastmilk alcohol levels closely parallel the blood alcohol levels of the adult.
- The highest alcohol level in breastmilk occurs 30 to 60 minutes after an alcoholic product has been consumed.
- It takes on average two hours from the commencement of drinking one standard drink to clear alcohol from breastmilk, and up to eight hours after drinking four standard drinks.
- Alcohol is not stored in breastmilk and the amount will not change by expressing or 'pumping and dumping' (the manual expression and discarding of breast milk). This does not speed up the process of reducing alcohol concentration in breastmilk supply.
- Breastmilk will have no alcohol in it only when the person's blood alcohol has gone back to zero.
- Even a small amount of alcohol exposure through breastmilk is associated with reduced milk production, reduced milk consumption by the baby, disruptions in the baby's sleep, deficits in psychomotor development and reductions in cognitive ability in early childhood.
- All types of alcohol have the potential to damage the baby, be it wine, beer or spirits, and no amount of alcohol has been proven to be safe.
- Many people are unaware of what a standard drink is. A standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. This equates to a small 100ml glass of red wine, a can or bottle (375ml) of mid-strength beer, or a shot or nip (30ml) of spirits.

### For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is safest for their baby

*National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol, 2020<sup>2</sup>*

### Impacts of alcohol consumption while breastfeeding

Research shows that even small amounts of alcohol exposure through breastmilk is associated with:

- decreased milk production and decreased milk consumption by the baby
- disruptions in infant sleep–wake behavioural patterns and an infant's ability to modulate behaviours
- deficits in infant psychomotor development
- reductions in cognitive abilities in early childhood<sup>1,4-5</sup>
- The evidence does not identify a 'safe' or 'no-risk' level of alcohol consumption while breastfeeding<sup>2</sup>

## Supporting people who are breastfeeding

- People may ask you to provide advice and support on alcohol and breastfeeding and may wish to discuss reducing their baby's potential exposure to alcohol via breast milk..
- You can advise that the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that not drinking alcohol is safest for their baby.
- Key points of advice:
  - o Alcohol can impact milk production and supply, disrupt a baby's sleep and behaviours, result in infant psychomotor development deficits, and reduce cognitive abilities in early childhood.
  - o Alcohol appears in breastmilk within 30 to 60 minutes of the start of the first drink.<sup>3</sup>
  - o It takes an average of two hours from the commencement of drinking for one standard drink of alcohol to clear from breastmilk, and up to eight hours for four standard drinks to clear from breastmilk.

## Advice for minimising risk of harm

If alcohol is consumed while breastfeeding, there are some strategies that can minimise risk of harm:

- Avoid drinking any alcohol while breastfeeding supply is being established. This is typically the first month after birth but may take longer for some.
- Wait a minimum of two hours per standard drink before feeding.<sup>1</sup>
- Express enough breastmilk to feed the baby during the time that alcohol is in the milk supply.
- Do not share a sleep surface with an infant if alcohol has been consumed, due to an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Manually express for comfort purposes, however this milk should be discarded. Expressing breast milk then throwing it away ("pumping and dumping") after alcohol has been consumed does not decrease the amount of alcohol in the breast milk.
- The FeedSafe App can provide more personalised information and may be used to estimate how long it will take for alcohol to be processed according to a person's height, weight, and number of drinks consumed. This app is available at [feedsafe.net](https://www.feedsafe.net) for free.

## More information and support

### NHMRC Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol (2020)

The National Health and Medical Research Council's guidelines provide health professionals, policy makers and the Australian community with evidence-based advice on the health effects of drinking alcohol:

[nhmrc.gov.au/alcohol](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/alcohol)

### Alcohol and other drugs

The National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline offers support, information, counselling and referral to services for individuals, family and friends, General Practitioners and other health professionals:

**1800 250 015** or [drughelp.gov.au](https://www.drughelp.gov.au)

## Breastfeeding and alcohol

The Australian Breastfeeding Association provides further information about alcohol and breastfeeding: [breastfeeding.asn.au/bf-info/safe-when-breastfeeding/alcohol-and-breastfeeding](https://breastfeeding.asn.au/bf-info/safe-when-breastfeeding/alcohol-and-breastfeeding) or call the breastfeeding helpline on **1800 686 268**

## Safe sleeping

To learn more about safe sleeping visit Red Nose: [rednose.org.au/section/education](https://rednose.org.au/section/education) and the Sleep Foundation: [sleepfoundation.org/baby-sleep/sudden-infant-death-syndrome](https://sleepfoundation.org/baby-sleep/sudden-infant-death-syndrome)

Learn more about alcohol, pregnancy, breastfeeding and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder at [everymomentmatters.org.au](https://everymomentmatters.org.au)

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Learn more about FARE at [fare.org.au](https://fare.org.au)

### References

<sup>1</sup>Giglia, R. & Binns, C. (2006), Alcohol and lactation: A systematic review. *Nutr Diet*, 63: 103-116.

<sup>2</sup>National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Universities Australia. (2020). Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup>Lawton, M. (1985). Alcohol in breastmilk. *Aust N Z J Obstet Gynaecol*, 25: 71-73.

<sup>4</sup>Little, R. E., Anderson, K. W., Ervin, C. H., Worthington-Roberts, B. & Clarren, S. K. (1989). Maternal alcohol use during breast-feeding and infant mental and motor development at one year. *N Engl J Med*, 321(7): 425-30.

<sup>5</sup>Gibson, L. & Porter, M. (2018). Drinking or smoking while breastfeeding and later cognition in children. *Pediatrics*, 142(2): e20174266.