

Diet and Breastfeeding

QUESTION: Are there foods I should eat or avoid while I'm breastfeeding?

ANSWER: No. There are no foods (such as cow's milk) that every breastfeeding mother must have. (Cows don't "drink milk to make milk".) And there are no foods that all mothers must avoid. In most cases, there is no need to steer clear of chocolate, spicy foods, onions, garlic, broccoli, or cabbage. The key is: **everything in moderation.** In one study mothers had lots of garlic—more than anyone could eat with a meal. And their babies breastfed more. They liked the taste! In many countries, such as Thailand and Mexico, mothers eat spicy foods while breastfeeding with no ill effects on their babies. Enjoy!

QUESTION: Do I need to eat more than usual to make enough milk?

ANSWER: No. Just "eat to hunger." Extra calories do not seem to be as important as once thought. Your fat stores at your baby's birth provide much of the fuel needed to make milk. Research has found that your metabolism may be more efficient while breastfeeding than at other times. This may reduce your need for extra calories. More active mothers will need more calories, but they will likely also feel hungrier, too.

QUESTION: If my diet is not perfect, will my milk still be good for my baby?

ANSWER: Yes. Although eating well is good for **you** (it boosts your energy and resistance to illness), an ideal diet is not necessary to produce good quality milk. As breastfeeding expert Ruth Lawrence, MD, writes: "All over the world women produce adequate and even abundant milk on very inadequate diets." Studies have found that it takes famine conditions for several weeks before a mother's milk is affected.



QUESTION: How will I know if my baby is reacting to something I've eaten?

ANSWER: First, keep in mind that almost all babies have fussy periods and such reactions are unusual. **Your baby's fussiness is probably unrelated to your diet.** Besides fussiness, other signs in a baby are dry skin, congestion, bloody stool, rash, and wheezing. If you suspect a food is affecting your baby, try avoiding it. (Cow's milk takes two weeks or so to clear.) Then try eating it again. If your baby reacts, you'll know to avoid that food for a few months. (Most babies will not react after about six to nine months of age.) The most likely culprits are protein foods such as dairy, soy, egg white, peanuts, and fish. Only changing your diet will tell you for sure.

QUESTION: Is it okay to diet while I'm breastfeeding?

ANSWER: Yes. In fact, this may be the best time, as breastfeeding helps burn fat stores. But it's best to go slowly and lose weight gradually. Any diet should include at least 1800 calories per day.

As with other food products, artificial sweeteners are all right in moderation, one to two servings per day.

QUESTION: How much should I drink while I'm breastfeeding?

ANSWER: "Drink to thirst" is the simple guideline. Research has not yet found a link between the fluids a mother drinks and her milk production. (Milk production is based on the number of times per day your milk is drained well from your breasts.) If your urine is dark yellow, this is a sign that you need more fluids. To make it easy to get a drink when thirsty, keep a container of water or juice at your usual nursing spot.

*There are no foods that every breastfeeding mother must have. And there are no foods that all mothers must avoid. The key is: **everything in moderation.***

QUESTION: Are there foods that will increase my milk production?

ANSWER: Not that we know of. Again, milk production is based on how many times each day your milk is drained well from your breasts. The more times you breastfeed or express your milk and the more drained your breasts are, the more milk you will make. For information on herbal and prescribed medicines that increase milk production, talk to your lactation consultant.

QUESTION: As a vegetarian, is there anything special I need to know?

ANSWER: Yes. You need to either eat foods that have vitamin B₁₂ (such as eggs or dairy), eat foods with vitamin B₁₂ added, or take supplements. If you are on a vegan or macrobiotic diet or any other diet that does not include animal products, be sure to get enough B₁₂.



QUESTION: What about caffeine?

ANSWER: As with all parts of your diet, think moderation. One or two cups of coffee (or other caffeinated drinks such as teas or colas) are not likely to cause a reaction. Unless a baby is unusually sensitive, there is no need to abstain.

QUESTION: Can I have an occasional glass of beer or wine while I'm breastfeeding?

ANSWER: Yes. Moderate to heavy drinking is risky for your baby, but a little alcohol in the milk now and then has not been found to be harmful.

Mothers who want to avoid any alcohol in their milk can have their drink right after nursing. Research shows that alcohol passes quickly into a mother's milk, peaking within 30 to 60 minutes (60 to 90 minutes when taken with food). But it also passes out of milk quickly. For a 120-pound woman, it takes 2 to 3 hours for the alcohol in one glass of beer or wine to leave her milk. And there is no need to pump to make your milk alcohol-free. As blood alcohol levels drop, alcohol leaves the milk. If a breastfeeding mother has a stronger drink or more than one glass of beer or wine, it will take much longer for the alcohol to leave her milk.

This is general information and does not replace the advice of your healthcare provider. If you have a problem you cannot solve quickly, seek help right away.

Every baby is different, if in doubt, contact your physician or other healthcare provider.