Intermountain® Healthcare

Breastfeeding and Prescription Pain Medication

If you are taking prescription pain medication after surgery or after delivering a baby, you can still breastfeed. When medications is taken as prescribed, the risk to your baby is very small. You can also take steps to limit the amount of your pain medication that gets to your baby. This handout tells you how.

Note: This handout does not discuss **anesthesia,** the pain control used *during* your surgery. Anesthesia medication leaves your body very soon after surgery and usually does not affect breast milk.

What is opioid pain medication?

One common type of prescription pain medication is **opioid** medication. (It is also sometimes called "narcotic" medication, but when prescribed by a doctor it is called "opioid.") This is a strong medication that affects the way your brain understands pain.

Opioids are often prescribed after surgery or childbirth. Your prescription may have brand names such as **Percocet, Norco, Vicodin, Tylenol #3,** or **Lortab.** It may also include generic names such as **oxycodone or hydrocodone.**

Why do I need prescription pain medication?

Controlling your pain after surgery is very important. It not only makes you more comfortable, it helps you heal and recover. As you heal and recover, you can take better care of your baby and yourself. Your doctor may prescribe a strong pain medication if you have had:

- A C-section (Cesarean section)
- A cut or tear in your vaginal area during childbirth
- Any surgery or condition that causes severe pain

Is it safe to breastfeed while I'm using prescription pain medication?

Yes, when you take it as prescribed. Prescription pain medications have been shown to be safe when:

- You take only the amount prescribed
- You take it only for as long as prescribed (usually for a short period of time, 4 to 6 days or fewer)

Don't let concerns about your prescription pain medication stop you from breastfeeding. The benefits of breastfeeding are greater than the risks of these medications. If you don't keep breastfeeding, you risk losing your milk supply.

You do, however, need to take steps to limit the amount of pain medication that gets to your baby. **The instructions on the other side of this handout will help you breastfeed safely.**

How can I prepare before surgery?

If you are going to have surgery, you can prepare milk for your baby ahead of time. If you need a breast pump, or if you have questions about breastfeeding, ask to talk with your hospital's lactation consultant.

- **In the days before your surgery,** pump and freeze milk so your baby will have it while you're in surgery. This milk can also be used if you don't feel like breastfeeding in the first hours after your surgery.
- **Just before going in to the operating room,** pump your milk. Make sure to bring your pump to the hospital.
- **Right after surgery,** pump if you don't feel like breastfeeding right away. This is important to help keep up your milk supply, and keep your breasts from getting too full and uncomfortable.

How can I breastfeed safely?

The steps below will help protect your baby from getting too much of your medication:

- **Talk with your baby's doctor about ALL the medications you are taking. This includes:**
  - Medications you were taking before your surgery or delivery
  - Any medication prescribed by another doctor, dentist, or other healthcare provider while you are breastfeeding

Your baby's doctor will tell you if it's safe to use these medications while breastfeeding.

- **For the first few days, take your medication *exactly* as the doctor recommends.**
  - **If you've just delivered your baby,** you won't have much milk for about the first 4 days. By the time your milk comes in, it's best to manage your pain using Tylenol or Motrin.
  - **If you've just had surgery,** your doctor will adjust your prescription to a level that is safe for your baby.
- **Breastfeed first. Then take your pain medication.** The pain medication is at its highest level in your body 1 to 2 hours after you take it. It's best to breastfeed just *before* taking your medication.
- **Call your doctor if,** one week after your surgery or delivery:
  - You still need your prescription pain medication on a regular schedule (every 4 to 6 hours)
  - Your pain gets worse
- **Do NOT take additional Tylenol.** Tylenol (also called acetaminophen) is a common pain medication you can buy over the counter. Some prescription medications, including opioids, also contain Tylenol. If you are taking opioids, or another pain medication that contains Tylenol, never take more Tylenol.

What should I watch out for?

If your baby shows any of the symptoms below, check with your doctor. If you can't reach your doctor, go to the emergency room.

- If your baby is much sleepier than normal or is difficult to arouse for feedings
- If your baby's breastfeeding patterns change or your baby can't suck as well as usual
- If your baby is constipated

What should I do with my leftover prescription pain medication?

Get rid of it. Leftover pain medication can be extremely dangerous if taken when it was not prescribed. It should not be used for sleep, headaches, hemorrhoids, or any other condition not related to this delivery or surgery. The FDA recommends the safest way to get rid of opioids is to flush them down the toilet. (Note: This is *not* recommended for most other medications.)

NEVER share prescription pain medication with anyone, not even family members.

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