

Breastfeeding and Opioid Pain Medication

What is opioid pain medication?

Opioids [OH-pee-oidz] are strong pain medications available only by prescription. They are sometimes prescribed after surgery or childbirth. Your prescription may have brand names such as **Percocet**, Norco, or Roxicodone. It may also include generic names such as **oxycodone** or **hydrocodone**.

Note: This handout does not discuss **anesthesia** [an-eh-STEEZ-ya], the pain control used during your procedure. Anesthesia medication leaves your body very soon after surgery and usually does not affect breast milk.

Why do I need opioid pain medication?

Controlling your pain after a procedure is very important. It makes you more comfortable and 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 an opioid pain medication if you have had:

- A C-section (Cesarean section).
- A cut or tear in your vaginal area during childbirth (opioids are rarely prescribed after a vaginal delivery if there is no cut or tear).
- Any surgery or condition that causes severe pain.



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

Yes. When these medications are taken as prescribed, the risk to your baby is small. Opioid pain medications have been shown to be safe when:

- You take only the amount as needed to control your pain.
- You take them only for as long as prescribed. This is usually a short time — 4 to 6 days or fewer.

Don't let concerns about your opioid 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.

How can I prepare before surgery?

Tell your doctor you are breastfeeding before any surgery. If you are going to have surgery, you can express (pump) and store milk for your baby ahead of time.

- **In the days before your surgery**, pump and freeze your 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 right 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.

If you need a breast pump, or if you have questions about breastfeeding, ask to speak with your hospital's lactation consultant.

How do I take opioids safely?

- **Tell your doctor about all medications you're taking.** Bring a list of all prescriptions, over-the-counter medications (like cough syrup or allergy pills), patches, inhalers, injections, vitamins, and herbal remedies you use. Tell your doctor if you use marijuana or street drugs, or drink alcohol.

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

- **Always take your medication exactly as the doctor recommends.**
 - **If you've just delivered your baby,** most pain can be taken care of with non-opioid medication like acetaminophen (Tylenol or others) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil, or others). Use the opioids your doctor prescribes only when the other medications aren't controlling your pain.
 - **If you've just had surgery,** your doctor will adjust your opioid prescription to a level that's safe for your baby.
- **Do NOT take extra acetaminophen** [ah-see-tah-MIN-uh-fen]. Acetaminophen is the main ingredient in Tylenol and other pain medicines. Some prescription drugs, including opioids, also have acetaminophen added. Taking too much acetaminophen can cause an overdose. Only take what your doctor recommends.
- **Watch out for signs of an opioid overdose.** Even when taken correctly, opioids can sometimes slow down your breathing and can be life-threatening. Let your family members know you are taking opioids. If they notice that you are hard to wake up, your breathing is slow, or your lips or fingernails turn blue, they should call 911 and give you naloxone. For more information, See [Naloxone for Opioid Overdose](#) for instructions.

After one week, if you still need your prescription pain medication on a regular schedule (every 4 to 6 hours), or your pain gets worse, call your doctor.

How do I breastfeed safely?

Your doctor will give you an amount of opioid that will be safe for your baby. If you are worried about the effects of opioids, here are some steps you can take.

- **Take opioids right before feeding your baby.** An opioid is at its highest level in your body 1 to 2 hours after you take it. If you take it right before feeding, the opioids should be at their lowest levels before your next feeding (see an example of a schedule on page 3).
- Monitor your baby for effects of opioids.

What should I watch out for in my baby?

- **Watch your baby for side-effects** when you start taking opioids. Also, watch closely when you stop or change the amount of opioids you take. If you notice any of the symptoms listed below, call your doctor. If you can't reach your doctor, go to the emergency room.
 - Your baby is much sleepier than normal or is difficult to wake for feedings
 - Your baby's breastfeeding patterns change or your baby can't suck as well as usual
 - Your baby is constipated or has diarrhea
 - Your baby has tremors or begins shaking
 - Your baby begins vomiting

What should I do with my leftover medication?

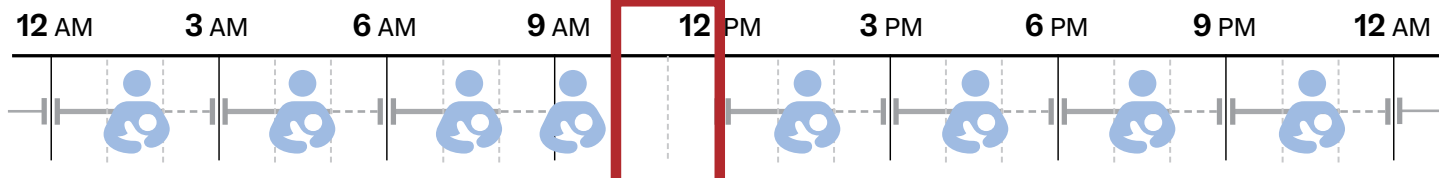
Get rid of leftover medicine at a drug collection site. Unused pills can be dangerous to keep. You can find drop-off locations on these websites:

- [National Association of Boards of Pharmacy \(NABP\)](#)
- [U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency](#)

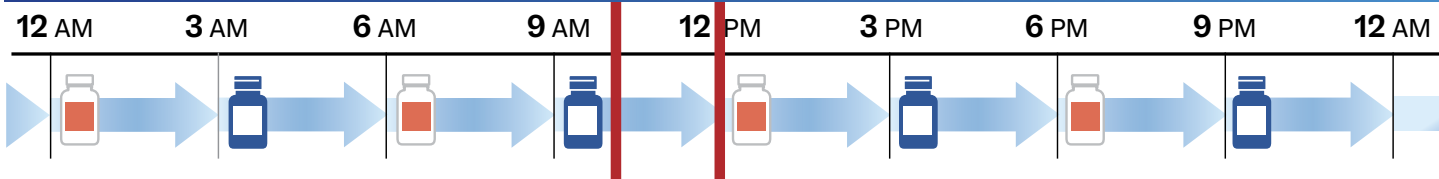
It's better not to flush medicines down the toilet. They can pollute the water supply.

Sample schedule for taking opioids while breastfeeding

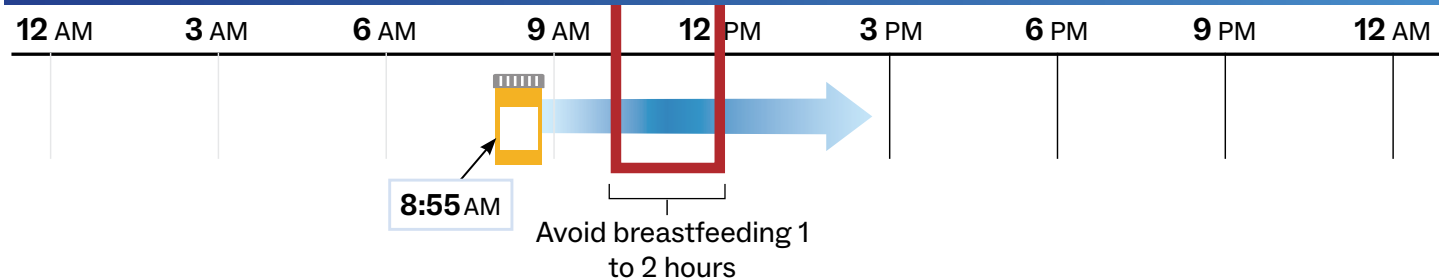
Breastfeeding Schedule: Every 2 to 3 hours



Safe Non-opioid Schedule: Every 3 hours



Opioid Medication: As needed for breakthrough pain



= Breastfeeding



= Acetaminophen



= Ibuprofen



= Opioid medication

Breastfeeding Schedule

Breastfeed every 2 to 3 hours.

Safe Non-opioid Schedule

Alternate between acetaminophen and ibuprofen every 3 hours for pain and swelling. Acetaminophen and ibuprofen can be taken safely at anytime during your breastfeeding schedule. Avoid taking opioid medication if your pain is managed with this cycle.

Opioid Medication

Take opioid medication for breakthrough pain as needed **right before** breastfeeding. When possible, avoid breastfeeding between 1 and 2 hours after taking the opioid. This is when it is at its highest level in your body. It is important to take the opioid medication **right before** breastfeeding so that **your baby is exposed to as little of the opioid medication as possible in your milk.**

Your doctor may prescribe opioid medication to take on a schedule of every 4 to 6 hours, **but only take as needed.**