

# Breastfeeding and Opioid Pain Medicine

This handout will help you understand how to breastfeed if you must take opioid medicine for a short time.

## What is opioid pain medicine?

Opioids [OH-pee-oidz] are strong pain medicines available only by prescription. They're sometimes called **narcotics**.

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

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

## Why do I need opioid pain medicine?

**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 an opioid pain medicine 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 not cut or tear.)
- Any surgery or condition that causes severe pain.



## What do I need to do?

- 1 Read this fact sheet to learn how you can protect your breastfeeding baby.
- 2 If you're having surgery, prepare breast milk ahead of time.
- 3 Ask your healthcare providers any questions you have about breastfeeding.
- 4 Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how and when to take your medicine. Make sure you are **very clear** about what to do.

## Is it okay to breastfeed while I'm using opioid pain medicine?

Opioid pain medicines always have risks. When these medicines are taken as prescribed, the risk to your baby is very small. They have the least risk when:

- You take only the amount prescribed.
- You take them only for as long as prescribed (usually a short period— 4 to 6 days or fewer).

Don't let concerns about your opioid pain medicine stop you from breastfeeding. **The benefits of breastfeeding are greater than the risks of these medicines.** 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 medicine 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.

- **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 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 talk with your hospital's lactation consultant.

## How can I protect my breastfeeding baby?

To protect your baby while breast feeding:

- **Tell your doctor about everything else you're taking.** Bring a list of the prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, patches, vitamins, and herbal pills you use. Tell your doctor if you use street drugs or drink alcohol.

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

- **For the first few days, take your medicine 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 pain with non-opioid medicine like Tylenol or Motrin.
  - **If you've just had surgery**, your doctor will adjust your prescription to a level that's safe for your baby.

- **Breastfeed first. Then take your pain medicine.** The pain medicine 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 medicine.
- **Call your doctor if**, one week after your surgery or delivery:
  - You still need your prescription pain medicine 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 medicine you can buy over the counter. Some prescription medicines, including opioids, also contain Tylenol. If you are taking opioids or another pain medicine that contains Tylenol, never take more Tylenol.

## What should I watch out for?

If your baby shows any of the symptoms 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 arouse for feedings.
- Your baby's breastfeeding patterns change or your baby can't suck as well as usual.
- Your baby is constipated.

## What should I do with my leftover opioid medicine?

Get rid of it safely. Leftover opioids can be extremely dangerous if taken when not prescribed. Do not use it for any condition not related to this delivery or surgery. Never share them with anyone, not even family members, even if they are in pain.

Drop off leftover pills at a collection site at any Intermountain Healthcare pharmacy. To find other collection sites, visit [useonlyasdirected.org](http://useonlyasdirected.org).

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