

Codeine and breastfeeding

Codeine is commonly prescribed for pain relief after birth. Recent guidance has highlighted potential, very rare, problems if taking codeine while breastfeeding, suggesting avoiding codeine altogether.

Summary: What is the problem and what is our advice?

Codeine can pass to your baby via breast milk. Very rarely your baby may get a high dose from breast milk causing increased sleepiness, difficulty breastfeeding, breathing difficulties and limpness. There is no evidence of a safer alternative and the risk is very low. At the Royal Berkshire Hospital we suggest only using codeine if needed in addition to 'simple' pain relief (paracetamol and ibuprofen), only using for as long as needed, and watching your baby closely for signs of problems. If you have any concerns contact a midwife, doctor or call 999.

Further, detailed, explanation

Codeine has been used safely for many years in many people, including breastfeeding mothers. In June 2013, the European Medicines Agency and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) issued new guidance recommending that breastfeeding mothers should not take codeine as it may cause problems for their baby.

Codeine is metabolised (changed by the body) to morphine and some people metabolise codeine faster than others resulting in higher levels of morphine in blood and, possibly, breast milk. It is difficult to predict or know who is a fast metaboliser of codeine.

The alternatives to codeine (in addition to paracetamol and / or ibuprofen) would be even stronger pain relief in the form of morphine or other drugs whose effects are less known in breastfeeding women (such as tramadol or dihydrocodeine)

What are the signs of codeine toxicity in babies and mothers?

Baby

- Increased sleepiness (breastfed babies usually feed every 2 to 3 hours and should not sleep more than 4 hours at a time).
- Difficulty breastfeeding.
- Breathing difficulties.

- Limpness in the baby.

Mother

- A mother may become so sleepy that she may have difficulty caring for her baby.

If a breastfeeding baby or mother shows these signs, call for help if still in hospital, go to Accident + Emergency or call 999 (or local emergency services).

Our advice at the Royal Berkshire Hospital

We have decided to continue prescribing codeine to breastfeeding women who require pain relief after delivery. We believe that there are no alternatives that are better than current treatment. We suggest using codeine only in addition to simple pain relief (paracetamol / ibuprofen) and only using it for as long as needed and in the lowest dose needed.

We will revise this advice depending on developments within national and international advice.

Further information

The guidance from the MHRA can be found by searching for:

- Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (or MHRA) and Codeine

Or follow this link:

- <http://www.mhra.gov.uk/Safetyinformation/DrugSafetyUpdate/CON296400>

More information is available on the Trust website: www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

MAT_1519

Authors: Dr G Jackson and Dr R Jones (consultant anaesthetists)

Written: November 2013

Reviewed: January 2016

Approved: Maternity Information Group & Patient Information Manager, January 2016

Review due: January 2018