

Is it Safe to Use Marijuana and Provide Milk for my NICU Baby?

Now that marijuana has been legalized in many areas, mothers often think that it is okay to use marijuana while breastfeeding or providing milk for a NICU baby.

You may even have heard that marijuana will help your milk supply, or that it cannot harm your baby because it is natural. No one knows for sure about how marijuana affects babies who receive their mothers' milk. However, several facts about marijuana make it risky during breastfeeding, especially if your baby is premature or has a health condition that requires NICU care.

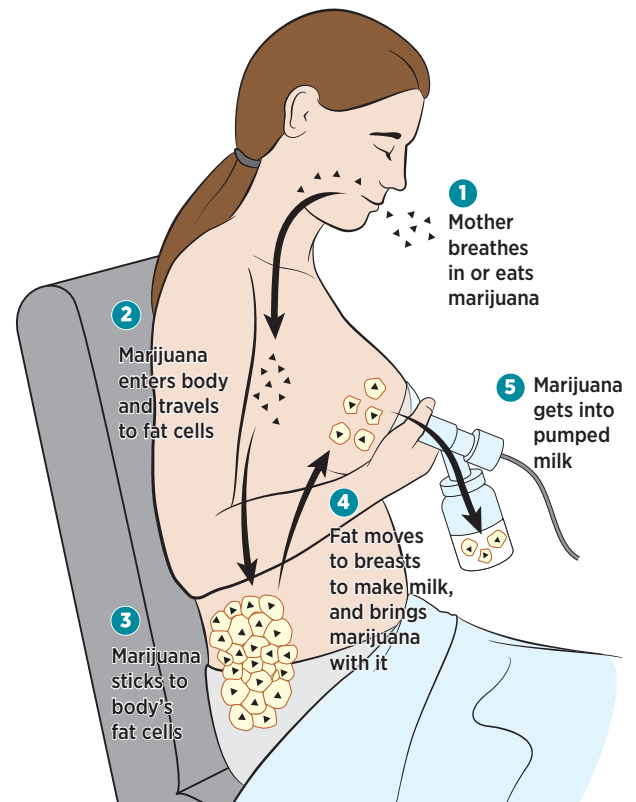
Does marijuana get into my milk?

There are very few studies about marijuana and providing milk or breastfeeding, but facts about marijuana tell us that it passes into mothers' milk.

- **Marijuana is lipophilic**, meaning that the drug's active parts seek out *fat* tissues in the body and stick to them. Lipophilic medications can build up in fat tissues and reach very high levels because the body removes them slowly. This slow removal of marijuana from the body is why urine tests for marijuana can be positive for days or weeks after the actual marijuana use. In general, lipophilic medications should be avoided or used with caution in breastfeeding mothers.
- **Mothers' milk has lots of fat!** Over half of the calories in your milk come from fat. This fat is different from the fat in donor milk or formula because it is easy for your baby to digest, and gives him/her needed calories to grow. The fat in your milk is also very important for your baby's brain development. However, when fat from your body stores is moved to your breasts to make milk, the marijuana comes along with it.

How can marijuana be harmful for my baby?

When a baby is born prematurely, his/her brain is only partly grown compared to the brain of a full-term baby. During the NICU hospitalization, your baby's brain grows and develops very rapidly. Your milk helps brain growth much better than formula or donor milk. However, marijuana in your milk might affect the growth and development of your baby's brain.



- Fat makes up about half of the brain's growth during the first two years of life. The fat in your milk helps make important connections in your baby's brain that speed up the messages that go from one part of the brain to another. These connections are important for learning and remembering.
- Marijuana in milk attaches to areas in the immature brain that control normal development, and may cause serious and long-lasting effects, especially in thinking, memory and emotions.

I've been told marijuana helps me relax and boosts my milk supply.

This is a common belief, but it is wrong. Marijuana causes the release of a brain chemical called **dopamine**, much like smoking a cigarette or drinking an alcoholic beverage. Dopamine release often helps people concentrate and feel more relaxed. However, dopamine works directly against the milk-making hormone called **prolactin**, so regular marijuana use may decrease your milk supply. On the other hand, breastfeeding or pumping allow the release of natural hormones such as oxytocin and prolactin, that promote relaxation as well as more milk for your baby.

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Funded by:





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We look forward to your inquiry at: contact@lactahub.org