

Should women breastfeed if they take anticonvulsant medication?

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Beneficial effects of breastfeeding for both mother and child are widely documented and acknowledged. Breastfeeding is an essential biological function of humans and the normative standard of infant feeding. Restricting a mother's natural inclination to breastfeed must therefore be justified by evidence that any harmful effect is likely to outweigh the advantages. Human milk enhances growth and development, reduces infection risk in infancy, and lowers risk of sudden infant death syndrome, allergic disease, possibly inflammatory bowel disease, childhood leukemia, obesity and diabetes. It may have a beneficial effect on the child's neurocognitive abilities. Breastfeeding is an important aspect of the psychological mother-child relationship, and also has positive effects on maternal health and well-being. On the other hand, there are concerns over the safety of the baby's drug exposure during lactation, mainly related to fears of adverse CNS developmental effects by toxic substances during the post-natal period. Data on AED safety during lactation are limited, and mothers with epilepsy have often received conflicting breastfeeding advice from their neurologist, pediatrician or gynecologist. Factors to be considered include the degree of excretion of the specific drug into breast milk, the degree of maturity of the newborn's enzymatic system, the duration of breastfeeding, the effects of individual AEDs on the newborn's developing CNS in monotherapy and polytherapy, and also the strength of the mother's wish to breastfeed.