

Anaesthesia & painkillers in breastfeeding mothers

Introduction

This information leaflet aims to give you an idea of safe anaesthetic options that will minimise any impact on breastfeeding in the postoperative period

What is General anaesthetic?

- These are the drugs which put you to sleep and keep you asleep
- They are short-acting, and you recover from their effects very quickly
- Don't express and discard breast milk after anaesthesia.
- Levels in the body are very low and it's safe to breastfeed when awake

What are Painkillers?

Simple painkillers

- These include paracetamol and ibuprofen. These may be used during and after surgery.
- They are safe while breastfeeding.

Stronger painkillers

- These include opiates such as morphine, dihydrocodeine and fentanyl.

Side effects:

- You may be drowsy or queasy when you wake up. You will be given anti-sickness medication by the anaesthetist.
- Higher amounts or longer period of use can result in more serious effects such as slower breathing rate, particularly in newborns
- If you are taking dihydrocodeine or morphine and your baby becomes more sleepy than usual, stop taking it and talk to your doctor/ seek medical attention immediately

Drugs you should avoid

Codeine

- Codeine can cause excessive sedation and even death in some breastfeeding babies
- Current evidence does not recommend the use of codeine phosphate in mothers who are breastfeeding.
- Codeine can be found in both medicines from the community pharmacy and hospital e.g., Co-codamol.

Diazepam

- Transferred in breastmilk in significant levels

Aspirin

- Should be avoided unless told by your doctor that the benefit outweighs the risk.

What are alternatives to General anaesthesia?

- Spinal or epidural anaesthesia involves injection of local anaesthetic into your lower back, numbing your legs and abdomen for a period of time.
- Regional anaesthesia is another form of local anaesthetic, where the nerves supplying an area of your body are numbed with local anaesthetic.
- All types of local anaesthesia are safe to use in breastfeeding mothers.
- Local anaesthetics may not be suitable for all procedures, therefore a discussion with your surgeon and anaesthetist may be required.

Safety precautions while using anaesthetic drugs

Anaesthetic drugs will remain in your body for around 24 hours, possibly longer for bigger operations.

- You should not drive a car, operate machinery, or ride a bike during this time
- Ensure you have a responsible adult who can take you home and stay with you as your normal responses may be reduced as well as your ability to safely co-sleep
- Seek medical attention immediately if you or baby experience reduced breathing rate or become more sleepy than usual.

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by Royal Devon staff undertaking procedures at the Royal Devon hospitals.

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