Chapter 15 - Are medications transmitted through breast feeding?
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Breast feeding has many advantages. The breast milk is the most nutritious food for the newborn infant, and this fact is important to keep in mind when evaluating the risks of medications transmitted through breast feeding.

What are the factors to consider?
Medications can be transmitted from the mother’s blood to the newborn baby through breast milk. This is not an issue for most medications, since the amount is often too small to influence the baby. It is, however, important to be cognizant that a 12- to 15-pound baby consumes about one quart of milk daily, and that its liver has a limited capacity to break down medications. Thus, a basic rule is to restrict use of medications while breast feeding. If the mother needs medical treatment, the newborn baby ought to be carefully monitored.

Which medications ought to be avoided while breast feeding?
Some medications ought to be avoided entirely, including those prescribed for treatment of tumors, disturbances of the immune system, ergotamine (for migraine), and lithium (for the prevention of the mani-depressive syndrome). Tranquilizers can cause drowsiness in the baby and difficulties with breast feeding. Bupropion (Zyban), used as a smoking cessation aid, and its breakdown product may be transmitted in concentrations that can cause serious adverse reactions, including seizures.

The peak concentration of a medication in the breast milk is usually reached within an hour or so after the mother’s intake. The concentration drops quickly thereafter. To be extra safe, mothers may take their medications as the baby gets ready for its longest period of sleep.

Where do I find information about the safety of a medication?
This information is typically included in the package insert (see Chapter 35). If you wish to get additional information, talk to your pharmacist or call the manufacturer’s Information Office and ask for more details.

The package insert for some medications lack information on breast feeding. This is primarily the case for medications that are considered to be safe, such as certain vitamins, iron medications, and ointments for treatment of skin conditions. The exceptions are medications containing vitamins A and
D. They have information on breast feeding in their package inserts, since overdosing may be harmful to newborn babies.

Another excellent source of information about drugs and breast feeding is the National Library of Medicine’s LactMed database (www.toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/cgi-bin/sis/htmlgen?LACT). This database includes drugs and other chemicals that breastfeeding mothers may be exposed to. It includes information on the levels of such substances in breast milk and infant blood, and the possible adverse effects in the nursing infant. Statements of the American Academy of Pediatrics concerning a drug’s compatibility with breastfeeding are provided, as are suggested therapeutic alternatives to those drugs where appropriate. All data are derived from the scientific literature and fully referenced.

What are the current requirements for lactation labeling?
A “Nursing mothers” subscription must be included in either the “Use in Specific Populations” section or the “Precautions” section of the labeling. It must contain information about excretion of the medication in human milk, and any serious adverse reactions on the nursing infant. A description of any pertinent adverse effects observed in animal offspring also should be included. Even if the medication is not associated with serious adverse reactions, the labeling must state that caution must be exercised when the medication is administered to a nursing mother. If information on excretion in human milk is unknown, this should be stated in the labeling and caution should be exercised.

The FDA has recently proposed changes to the format and content of the pregnancy and lactation labeling for human prescription drugs and biological products. It is proposed that the labeling include a summary of these drug risks during pregnancy and lactation, and a discussion of the data. It also should include relevant clinical information to help health-care providers make prescribing decisions and counsel women. The current pregnancy categories would be eliminated.

Key messages

✔ Medications can be transmitted from the mother to the newborn baby through breast milk.
✔ For most medications, the concentration in breast milk is too small to influence the baby.
✔ The basic rule: Restrict use of medications while breast feeding.
✔ The package insert typically has information on possible risks during breast feeding.
✔ Important additional information is provided on the National Library of Medicine website.