

Medication use during pregnancy and breastfeeding

A resource for patients, by patients

Living with a chronic disease means that we may rely on prescription medications to stay healthy and to manage and slow the progression of the disease. When pregnancy or breastfeeding enters the picture, we worry about our health but also the health of the baby.

It is important to consider how medications – including over the counter and prescription medications – could affect the developing fetus / baby or whether the medication transfers to breast milk. Working with and consulting your doctor (ideally your rheumatologist and/or obstetrician) as early as possible and throughout pregnancy is important to get advice on which medications may be appropriate before pregnancy, during pregnancy and when breastfeeding. This also applies to men who may need to review what medications they take. Some medications, like Methotrexate, Leflunomide, Cyclophosphamide, and Cellcept, are not recommended before or during pregnancy as they are known to be teratogenic. This means they contain materials that are known to negatively affect the development of the fetus / baby.

How medications are approved

All prescription medications are reviewed by government regulators, such as [Health Canada](#), the [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) (in the US) or the [European Medicines Agency \(EMA\)](#), before they can be widely sold and prescribed to people. Medications are reviewed through various phases of clinical trials (studies that involve people to test medications) to see whether they work and are safe to use. You can learn more about clinical trials by visiting www.itstartswithme.ca.

Clinical trials recruit people living with health conditions that represent different ages, backgrounds, etc. However, pregnant women and women of reproductive age are often excluded from clinical trials that test medications. This is often done because of ethical concerns about testing a medication may cause harm to the pregnant woman and their fetus / baby. As a result, information on medication use in pregnant and breastfeeding women is collected **after** a drug is approved.

The government regulators (e.g., FDA, EMA, Health Canada) that approve medications for use in people typically provide information or medication guides on how to properly use the

medication. This information or medication guides may also provide information about the use of the medication during pregnancy or breastfeeding. For example, the FDA has implemented a new way of showing information on medication use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. To learn more, you can find the medication on the [FDA website](#) and refer to the “Pregnancy” section of the medication guide.

There are several organizations that do research on medication use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. The following websites include information on medication used during pregnancy and breastfeeding:

- [Mother to Baby](#)
- [Lact Med](#)
- [Infant Risk](#)
- [Centre de référence sur les agents tératogènes \(CRAT\)](#)
- [E-lactancia](#)

Other resources are also available but are not available in plain language summaries. However, you are welcome to visit the American College of Rheumatology [Reproductive Health Guidelines](#), [European League Against Rheumatism recommendations for Women’s Health](#) and the [results of a EULAR taskforce on the use of anti-rheumatic medications before pregnancy, during pregnancy and during lactation](#). These websites contain trustworthy and evidence-based information about the use of medications during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Talk to your rheumatologist or obstetrician before making any decisions about medication use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. It is best to learn as much information as possible before your appointment to allow for a meaningful discussion with your doctor. Refer to the CAPA resource “[Making the most out of your next appointment](#)” for more information.

Questions to consider

As you consult your doctor and other resources, you will discover that the information about medication use during pregnancy and breastfeeding is not as complete since it is often studied in a smaller number of patients or perhaps not at all. In some situations, the medications may have been tested in animals but not in humans. Here are a few questions to ask your doctor when making a decision:

- What are the risks to the fetus / baby of taking the medication including long-term outcomes on their health?
- What are the risks of not taking your medication (e.g., pain, inflammation) before pregnancy? During pregnancy? While breastfeeding?
- What are the benefits of taking your medication or keeping disease under control during your pregnancy?
- Do any of the medications affect or potentially affect fertility?
- If a medication is known to not be safe during pregnancy, how long must it be stopped before trying to have a baby (you may wish to get information on the medication half-life which is how long it takes for half of the dose of medication to be eliminated from your body)?
- What other medications are available to manage arthritis during pregnancy and after birth?
- How many pregnant or breastfeeding moms were part of the study or studies? If there were not a lot of patients in the clinical trial or study, what assurances can your doctor offer about the data?
- If birth defects are found in approximately 1 out of 100 children born, what is the risk of a birth defect if I take the medication?

“Having a good relationship with a trusted rheumatologist was so helpful. Feeling comfortable calling to request more medication support or guidance from my rheumatologist made a difficult pregnancy much easier.”

Making decisions on how to feed your baby is a personal one that is best made by you. There is a lot of pressure on new Moms that “breast is best,” but it is not necessarily the best choice, especially for one living with a chronic illness. Breastfeeding adds extra physical strain on a new mom. The [Fed is Best foundation](#) offers resources to support moms feeding their children, no matter how your child is fed. You can listen to [this podcast](#) with Mariah Leach and Cheryl Crow as they speak about breastfeeding with autoimmune arthritis.

Participating in pregnancy registries

Some of the organizations that provide information on medication use during pregnancy and breastfeeding run create or maintain what are called Pregnancy Registries. These registries track the outcomes in moms and babies who are exposed to medication during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

If you decide to take a medication during pregnancy or when breastfeeding, consider participating in one of these registries. Every person who participates in a registry can help us all learn more about how medications affect us and our babies. You can access a list of pregnancy registries on the [FDA website](#) and [Mother to Baby website](#) - contact them to get involved!