ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION DURING LACTATION: EFFECTS ON MOTHER AND CHILD

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Abstract

The effects of alcohol consumption during lactation have not been established as widely as during pregnancy. Consequently, this lack of information makes mothers unaware of the risks that alcohol intake might have on both them and their developing infant. The aim of this review is to summarize the scientifically demonstrated adverse effects of alcohol consumption during lactation both on mother and child. In spite of the fact that the available data in this field is scarce and contradictory, there is evidence that alcohol intake during lactation is harmful for mothers’ lactational performance and their infants’ development, behaviour and preference to alcohol after being exposed to it.

Key words: lactation, breastfeeding, maternal alcohol intake, alcohol’s adverse effects.

Justification

Although breastfeeding has been accepted as the best and safest method so as to protect infants’ development, health and growth (Giglia & Binns, 2006), the analyzed prevalences are below the professional advice of exclusively breastfeeding until 6 months postpartum and partially breastfeeding until 2 years after birth (May et al., 2016).

Moreover, although there are strict recommendations for pregnant women about alcohol consumption during pregnancy, unawareness about alcohol’s adverse effects during lactation makes mothers consume higher amounts of alcohol during this period (May et al., 2016). Not only is there a lack of recommendations for lactating women about alcohol consumption, but alcohol has also been traditionally believed to be a galactagogue, beneficial for breastfeeding (Mennella, 1998).

Consequently, taking this lack of information about alcohol’s effects during lactation into account, the primary aim of this literature review is to assemble data from a wide variety of studies in order to clarify the scientifically concluded harmful effects of alcohol in terms of the breastfeeding mother and the breastfed child.

Breastfed infant and effects of alcohol exposure

Breastfeeding is acknowledged as the best method of infant nutrition, due to its developmental, economic, health and psychological benefits. Regarding the psychological profits, breastfeeding is advantageous for the mother and the child, due to the pleasant physical and psychological connection that it is developed between them, as well as being positively correlated to infants’ mental and psychomotor development and IQ levels (Salone et al., 2013).

However, when the breastfed infant is exposed to alcohol through breast milk, several adverse effects are observed. Thus, these are the principal areas that have been related to adverse effects on the infant due to maternal alcohol intake during lactation:

- Reduced abstract reasoning ability at 6 to 7 years after birth (Gibson & Porter, 2018).
- Lower weight and IQ average levels at seven years of age (May et al., 2016).
- Infant’s decreased psychomotor-Behavioural development at one year postpartum (Little et al., 1989).
- Slower weight, attained size and linear growth from 1 to 57 months (Backstrand, Goodman, Allen & Pelto, 2004).
- Neonatal exposure to different infant’s disposing to sleep faster but for shorter periods, referable to less active sleeping time, with less active wakingness and prolongation of sleep compensation 20.5 hours after alcohol exposure (Mennella & Gerrish, 1998).
- Increased infants’ sucking activity during the first minutes after maternal alcohol intake (Mennella & Beauchamp, 1991).
- Higher alcohol-flavoured milk consumption outside the breastfeeding context (Mennella, 1997).
- Alterations in infant sleep, modifying infant’s disposing to sleep faster but for shorter periods, referable to less active sleeping time, with less active wakingness and prolongation of sleep compensation 20.5 hours after alcohol exposure (Mennella & Gerrish, 1998).
- Alcohol’s effects on infants’ sucking activities and sleeping patterns alterations, with a larger number of state changes, more time crying and longer periods of fussiness (Schuetze et al., 2002).
- Modified mother-infant interactions, with increased levels of non-contingency and dyadic conflict (Schuetze et al., 2002).

Conclusions

Once these results have been introduced, it is clear that there is no scientific evidence about the positive effects of alcohol during lactation. On the contrary, alcohol has been found to negatively affect the lactational performance of the mothers, as well as disrupting infants’ development, growth, sleeping and feeding behaviours, mother-infant interactions and infant’s alcohol preference after being exposed to it. Consequently, the main conclusions of this literature review can be divided in two ideas:

1) Taking into account the unawareness of mothers to the effects of alcohol intake during lactation, as well as the myths about the galactagogue quality of alcohol, interventions and educational support for mothers and doctors are crucial in order to promote a secure alcohol intake.

2) More research is needed in order to rise an agreement about the harmful effects of alcohol during lactation, both on mother’s lactational performance and different areas of the infant.

References