

Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

Herbal teas: are they safe during pregnancy or while breastfeeding?

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, choose your herbal teas carefully! Keep in mind that while the dangerous effects are known for some herbs, for many others much is still unknown.

Herbs have been used to flavour our foods for a very long time, and the amounts used for flavouring are considered safe.

Herbs are also used to prevent or treat health problems. A wide range of healthcare providers promote herbs. When taken as a supplement or in a tea, you take in a higher dose than you would when eating herbs added to food. Be careful when using any herbal products including herbal teas during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.

Can herbs and herbal products be harmful?

Yes! Some herbs can be very strong and act like drugs. A few can be poisonous. For example, Black Cohosh is a herb that has been linked with liver damage. Black Cohosh should **not** be taken during pregnancy or breastfeeding as it may start labour. As well, Chamomile tea has been reported to have harmful effects on the uterus and should not be used while you are pregnant.

Why do I need to be careful when using herb teas during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

Herbs in teas can act like drugs and can be dangerous for you and your unborn baby. Be careful about using herbal teas while you are

pregnant or breastfeeding, in the same way that you are careful about using drugs.

Some herbal products can:

- cause contractions
- cause birth defects
- cause infant death
- pass through breastmilk and harm the baby

Some people are allergic to some herbs. If you are allergic to plants or pollen, you should not use herbs related to those plants.

How do I know if a herbal product is safe to use?

In Canada, any product that is sold to treat or prevent diseases or symptoms is regulated under Canada's *Food and Drugs Act*. The Natural Health Products Regulations within the *Food and Drugs Act* require that natural health products, such as herbs, be properly labelled and have a Natural Products Number (NPN).



Some natural products can be defined as drugs and these will have a DIN or Drug Identification Number on the label. Look for an NPN or DIN on the label. If a product does not have one of these numbers, it has not been approved for use and may not be safe to use.

Are there any safe herbal teas to use during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

According to Health Canada the following herbal teas are generally considered safe to drink during pregnancy and breastfeeding if taken in moderation. A moderate amount would be no more than two to three cups (1 cup = 250 mL) of tea a day. These teas can usually be found in a health food store.

Herbal teas generally considered safe if taken in moderation

- Ginger
- Linden flower*
- Rose hip
- Lemon balm
- Orange peel
- Citrus peel

*Not recommended for people with heart conditions

If you suffer from nausea during your pregnancy, try tea made by pouring boiling water over fresh, sliced ginger root. This “ginger root tea” may help you feel better.

Herbal teas should not take the place of more nutritious drinks such as milk. If you are thirsty, try hot water, hot water with lemon, lime, orange or ginger, hot milk or hot apple cider (pasteurized).

Is caffeine safe during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

It’s best to have no more than 300 milligrams of caffeine a day while you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Caffeine is more harmful to pregnant and breastfeeding women. Caffeine may also cause your breastfed baby to be cranky and have trouble sleeping.

Some people choose herbal teas to cut back on caffeine. If you decide to drink herbal teas instead of drinks that contain caffeine, choose teas from the safe list above.

Sources of Caffeine

Product	Caffeine Content
Coffee, filter 250 mL (8oz)	179 mg
Coffee, instant 250 mL (8oz)	76-106 mg
Cappuccino/Latte (8oz)	35 -63 mg
Tea*, 250 mL (8oz)	50 mg
Cola beverage, 1 can	36-50 mg
Energy drink, 250 mL (8oz)	38-110 mg
Hot cocoa mix, 1 envelope	5 mg
Chocolate bar, 56 g (2 oz)	10-40 mg

*Includes black, green and some flavoured teas

Are herbal teas and preparations safe for babies?

Health Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society and Dietitians of Canada recommend that herbal teas or drinks should **not** be given to babies.



If in doubt about herbal teas, check with a pharmacist, physician or dietitian, or call Motherisk at the Hospital for Sick Children 1-877-327-4636.

Books with reliable information about herbs

Robbers JE, Tyler VE. 1999. *Tyler's Herbs of Choice: The Therapeutic Use of Phytomedicinals*, by V.E. Tyler. New York: The Haworth Press Inc.

Herbs- Everyday Reference for Health Professionals, 2000. F. Chandler (ed.). Nepean: Canadian Pharmacists Association and the Canadian Medical Association.