

Herbal Remedies for Milk Supply

The following describes the use of some herbal treatments for breastfeeding mothers who are having various problems.

Approaches to Increase Milk Supply

It is quite possible that herbal remedies help increase milk supply. There are several drugs that obviously do increase milk supply, and of course it is reasonable to assume that some plants and herbs might contain similar pharmacological agents. Almost every culture has some sort of herb or plant or potion to increase milk supply. Some may work as placebos, which is fine; some may not work at all; some may have one or more active ingredients. Some will have active ingredients that will not increase the milk supply but have other effects, not necessarily desirable. Note that even herbs can have side effects, even serious ones. Natural source drugs are still drugs, and there is no such thing as a 100% safe drug. Luckily, as with most drugs, the baby will get only a tiny percentage of the mother's dose. The baby is thus extremely unlikely to have any side effects at all from the herbs. Two herbal treatments that seem to increase the milk supply are *fenugreek* and *blessed thistle*, in the following dosages:

Fenugreek: 3 capsules 3 times a day
Blessed thistle: 3 capsules 3 times a day, or 20 drops of the tincture 3 times a day

The tincture container states that blessed thistle should not be taken by nursing mothers, presumably because of the tiny amount of alcohol the mother would get. There are some preparations of both herbs that are labelled "not for use by nursing mothers". Don't worry about this; these herbs are safe for the mother to take because so little gets into the milk. Teas also seem to work, but to take enough to make a difference, you will be drinking tea all day and night, since the amount of the herbs you get is much less.

- Fenugreek and blessed thistle seem to work better if you take both, not just one or the other.
- Fenugreek and blessed thistle work quickly. If they do work, you will usually notice a difference within 12- 24 hours of starting taking them. If not, they probably won't work.
- Fenugreek is often sold as a combination with thyme. Do not buy this combination, but try to get the capsules with fenugreek alone.
- Herbal remedies are not standardized, so though the bottle of fenugreek, for example, may say that it contains 405, 505, 605 or 705 mg/capsule, we do not really know how much of the active ingredient you are taking. Fenugreek has a distinct smell. If you cannot smell it on your skin, you are not taking enough, even if you are taking three capsules three times a day.
- Fenugreek and blessed thistle seem also to work better in the first few weeks than later. In fact they tend to work best in the first week. Domperidone works better after the first few weeks. (See handouts *Domperidone 1 and Domperidone 2* for more information.)
- You can take fenugreek and blessed thistle together with Domperidone if you feel they are helping. If you take the herbs and Domperidone, take Domperidone at the same time, 3 tablets three times a day.
- If you are ready to stop fenugreek and blessed thistle, you can probably stop suddenly, or wean off over a week or so.
- Fenugreek does not cause low blood sugar. Where this rumour came from is unknown.

Other Herbal Treatments that have been used to increase milk supply are:

- alfalfa
- spirulina

- goat's rue
- raspberry leaf
- fennel
- brewer's yeast
- stinging nettle

Some Lactation Teas may be effective for some mothers. Again, with no standardization and little empirical evidence it is hard to know. We do hear from many mothers that have helped to increase their milk supply. These include: mother's milk teas, nursing teas, lactation teas. Certainly, it cannot hurt to try.

Food that may help:

- Eating oatmeal daily,
 - garlic in moderation,
 - ginger in moderation,
- are all thought to help milk supply. Again, they most likely cannot hurt.

Many cultures have their own “remedies” that they have found to be helpful. And why not? Fish and Papaya Soup, hot curry dishes, etc—they may help and they certainly cannot hurt.

Homeopathy is another approach that may work and consulting with a good Naturopath or Homeopath may prove helpful.

The effectiveness of *none* of these treatments, including blessed thistle and fenugreek, has been proved.

Remember! Herbal treatments are only part of the solution to “not enough milk” (see *Protocol to Satisfy Baby* at www.drjacknewman.com and look for videos on how to latch a baby on, how to know the baby is getting milk, how to use compression, how to use a lactation aid, as well as other information sheets on breastfeeding.

Questions? Email Jack Newman at drjacknewman@sympatico.ca, or Edith Kernerman at breastfeeding@sympatico.ca or consult: **Dr. Jack Newman's Guide to Breastfeeding** (called **The Ultimate Breastfeeding Book of Answers** in the USA) or our DVD, **Dr. Jack Newman's Visual Guide to Breastfeeding**; or **The Latch Book and Other Keys to Breastfeeding Success**; or **L-eat Latch & Transfer Tool**, or the **GamePlan for Protecting and Supporting Breastfeeding in the First 24 Hours of Life and Beyond**. See our website at www.drjacknewman.com. To make an appointment email breastfeeding@ccnm.edu and respond to the auto reply or call 416-498-0002.

Handout. *Herbal Remedies for Milk Supply*, May 2008

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