

Thrush and Breastfeeding

MotherSafe - Royal Hospital for Women**Updated February 2023**

Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your healthcare provider. Breastmilk provides optimum nutrition for babies and conveys many additional health benefits to mother and baby.

Vaginal Thrush in Breastfeeding Women

Vaginal thrush infection occurring during pregnancy which is not diagnosed or adequately treated will usually persist after childbirth. In new mothers with extreme stress or fatigue, or who have been treated with antibiotics, the thrush infection can actually get worse. It may be further complicated if a mother has stitches to repair a perineal tear or episiotomy.

Treatment of Vaginal Thrush

The recommended treatments for vaginal thrush in breastfeeding women are the same as those recommended for pregnant women (see **MotherSafe Thrush and Pregnancy factsheet**).

Thrush in Babies

The *Candida* organism which causes thrush can be passed on to your baby during or after the birth. As newborn babies' immune systems are still maturing, they are more susceptible to infections, and premature babies have an even greater risk of developing thrush. Thrush is usually seen as cottage cheese-like plaques inside the baby's mouth on the gums, cheeks, and palate. These resemble milk curds but are not easily removed. If the baby's mouth is sore, it may be difficult to feed properly. Thrush plaques are also sometimes seen in the nappy area if a baby has nappy rash. In many cases, thrush will clear up without any treatment, but if symptoms persist it is advisable to discuss appropriate treatment with your Child and Family Health Nurse, doctor, or pharmacist. Miconazole oral gel is the treatment of choice and is recommended even in very young babies. However, a spoon or dropper should not be used as the gel is potentially a choking risk. It must be applied directly in small amounts, with a clean finger to the tongue and inside cheeks. Nystatin drops may also be used but are considered less effective.¹

Nipple Thrush in Breastfeeding Women

A mother's nipples can become infected if oral thrush is not treated in her breastfed baby. This is more likely in mothers with cracked or grazed nipples (usually due to poor attachment of the baby when breastfeeding), in those who have been treated with antibiotics, or who have had recent vaginal thrush infection themselves.

Nipple thrush is difficult to diagnose, but symptoms include¹

- Severe pain in both breasts while breastfeeding, which may continue for some time after breastfeeding, and typically described by mothers as stabbing, shooting or deep cords of pain.
- Flaky, sensitive skin on and around nipple
- Red or shiny area around nipple

Thrush infection in the milk ducts in the breast is even more difficult to diagnose and some researchers have questioned whether ductal thrush infection exists, as it is hard to culture *Candida* from breast milk samples.

A lactation consultant or a healthcare professional with appropriate breastfeeding knowledge should observe a mother breastfeeding to rule out other causes of nipple pain before diagnosing a thrush infection in the breast.^{1,2}

Treatment of Nipple Thrush¹

It is important to treat both the mother and baby at the same time to prevent re-infection. Topical antifungal preparations are recommended as first line treatment in breastfeeding.

A small amount of nystatin cream or miconazole cream should be applied to the nipple after each breastfeed (or every 3-4 hours during the daytime). These antifungal agents are more effective if massaged into the nipple and areola for a few minutes, and do not need to be washed from the nipple before the next breastfeed. Any excess cream can be gently wiped away with a cream tissue. Both mother and baby need to be treated for a week or even longer, though the breast pain and other symptoms should show some improvement within 2 – 3 days.

NB. A topical cream preparation is preferred, as the oral liquid and gel are not formulated for skin application³ and are less likely to be effective. Moreover, miconazole gel can cause skin irritation in some mothers when applied directly to the nipple.

If symptoms do not improve with topical treatment, women are advised to consult their doctor. There are prescription antifungal medications, shown to be effective in treating thrush in the breast which are considered safe to take while breastfeeding.^{1,4,5}

Ask your midwife, doctor, or pharmacist for the brand names of these medicines.

Additional measures to help prevent thrush^{2,3}

Change breast pads often, as the thrush organism thrives in a moist and warm environment.

Wash hands thoroughly, particularly after each nappy change.

If using a dummy, boil dummies daily and replace every week.

Use a separate towel for each family member and wash towels daily.

Dietary changes such as reducing the level of sugar and yeast in the diet are often tried to reduce the incidence of thrush, however there is no evidence that these are effective.

Some mothers find that taking a probiotic helps to control thrush, especially after taking antibiotics.

References

1. The Royal Women's Hospital. Policy, Guideline and Procedure Manual. Breast and Nipple Thrush. Melbourne 2020. Available from https://thewomens.r.worldssl.net/images/uploads/downloadable-records/clinical-guidelines/breast-and-nipple-thrush_280720.pdf Accessed February 2023
2. Mannel R, Martens P, Walker M, editors International Lactation Consultant Association. Core Curriculum for Lactation Consultant Practice, 3rd ed. Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett; 2012.
3. The Breastfeeding Network. Thrush (of the breast/nipple) and Breastfeeding. Paisley, Scotland; 2020. Available from <https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/thrush-detailed/#:~:text=Symptoms%20of%20thrush%20are%20a,in%20only%20one%20breast%2F%20nipple> Accessed February 2023
4. Rossi S(ed). Antifungals Azoles. Australian Medicines Handbook (internet). Adelaide: Australian Medicines Handbook Pty Ltd; July 2022. Accessed September 2022
5. Kaplan YC, Koren G, Ito S, Bozzo P. Fluconazole use during breastfeeding. Can Fam Physician. 2015 Oct;61(10):875-6

Other resources

MotherSafe. Thrush and Pregnancy factsheet

Lactmed; Drug and Lactation Database. National Library of Medicine. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK501922/?report=classic>



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Breastfeeding Service*

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