



ILCA's *Inside Track* for breastfeeding mothers

A Publication of the International Lactation Consultant Association®



Body Modifications and Breastfeeding: What You Need to Know

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Piercings and tattoos have been around for over 5000 years and have become more popular in the past 20 years. If you're thinking about getting a tattoo or you already have your nipple(s) pierced, you may be wondering if you can breastfeed your baby. You can, but there are some important items you should know about first.

What Are the Risks for Mom?

- Nipple piercings—Risks include jewelry becoming either stuck in or pushed out of the skin. Other risks include infections, blocked or damaged milk ducts from scar tissue, leaking milk from the piercing holes, more or less sensitivity of the nipple, or an allergic reaction to the jewelry.



Nipple Piercing. Image courtesy of Robyn Roche-Paull.

- Tattoos—Risks include local infections if the tattoo is not well cared for, body-wide infections such as hepatitis B/C or HIV if the artist does not follow universal

precautions, or an allergic reaction to the ink, especially the color red.

What Are the Risks for Baby?

- Nipple piercings—Risks include problems feeding due to the very fast flow of milk through the holes, choking, damage to the baby's mouth, infections, or problems latching to the nipple from jewelry left in place.
- Tattoos—Risks include infections passed from mother to baby and possible heavy metal exposure from some inks.

Precautions & Recommendations

- **Plan ahead.** Professional piercers and tattoo artists will not tattoo or place nipple piercings in a pregnant or breastfeeding woman. If possible, wait 18 to 24 months after piercing your nipple(s) before getting pregnant. This lets the piercing heal and the jewelry can be removed without the holes closing up when breastfeeding. Saliva from a baby must not enter a freshly pierced nipple, and the jewelry must remain in place during the healing process.
- **Follow all universal precautions and aftercare instructions.** Be sure to go to a well-known piercer or tattoo artist who follows universal precautions and whose workplace is regulated by the local health department. Check with your local, state, provincial, or federal health departments for laws and regulations about tattooing and piercing. Follow all aftercare instructions. Ask about the metal content of the jewelry and the types of inks used.



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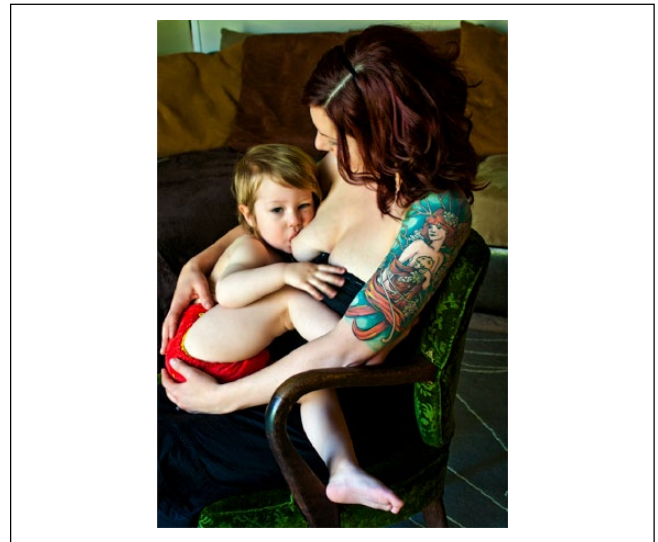
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- **Leave jewelry out during breastfeeding.** Most women find it easier to remove jewelry during the entire time they are breastfeeding. Putting in and taking out nipple jewelry with every feeding may cause infection and tenderness. Some women put a “taper” in between feedings to keep the piercing open.
- **Watch baby’s weight gain.** Be sure your baby’s weight gain is normal, and watch the number of wet and dirty diapers. Milk supply problems can happen due to scar tissue blocking the milk ducts.
- **Wait until baby is older or weaned.** It’s best to wait to get a new tattoo until your baby is older (9-12 months) or weaned to lessen the risk of infection or heavy metal exposure and to allow for healing. For nipple piercings, it’s best to wait until 3 months after weaning.
- **Contact your health care provider (HCP) or International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC).** If you have any problems with breastfeeding and your body modifications, be sure to contact your HCP or IBCLC immediately. It is very important to mention any tattoos or nipple piercings, even if the holes have closed.

or an allergic reaction to the “free” ink floating in the mother’s bloodstream.

- Tattoo ink does not cross into breast milk. The ink particles are too big.



Breastfeeding with Tattoos. Image courtesy of Josh Hilton. Used with permission.

Did You Know?

- Tattoo inks in the United States are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration as cosmetics, instead of for injection into the skin.
- Nipple piercings can take a full year or more to heal. Tattoos take at least 1 to 3 weeks to heal.
- You cannot donate milk for 12 months after receiving a piercing or tattoo.
- Laser removal of tattoos is safe while breastfeeding. The ink is broken into very small pieces and destroyed by the body’s immune system. Risks include infection

In Summary

You can have body modifications and still breastfeed. Follow the above recommendations and you can breastfeed your baby from a very beautiful and decorated body.

Resources

<https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/breastfeeding-and-nipple-piercing>

<http://www.llli.org/nb/nbiss4-09p4.html>

Find Help Fast

An IBCLC[®] is an “International Board Certified Lactation Consultant[®]”: someone with special training to help breastfeeding families. Go to “Find a Lactation Consultant” at www.ilca.org to locate a lactation consultant in your area. You can also ask your doctor or a nurse at your hospital.

Your local lactation consultant: