

Study finds physicians need to better recognize use of herbal supplements while breastfeeding

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In an article published in this month's issue of *Pediatrics In Review*, researchers from Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) stress the importance of physicians recognizing that many mothers use herbal supplements while breastfeeding in order to make accurate health assessments for both mother and child.

In the US, no existing regulatory guidelines set a standardized risk assessment of herbal supplement use during breastfeeding. Because of the highly limited number of studies on herb use during lactation, numerous resources have mixed reports and safety recommendations, making it confusing for both mother and clinician.

After completing a systematic review of human lactation and [herbal medicine](#) literature, the researchers found poor methodology in the few available studies and concluded that further research is needed to assess the prevalence, efficacy and safety of commonly used herbs during breastfeeding.

"It is important for physicians and clinicians to be more aware that mothers are using herbal supplements and how vital it is to ask the mothers, who are seeking a doctor's opinion when having trouble breastfeeding, about their use before making an assessment," said senior author Paula Gardiner, MD, MPH, assistant professor at BUSM and a physician of [family medicine](#) at Boston Medical Center.

Although there is little scientific evidence to support the efficacy or safety of herbal supplements, it is a common practice both nationally and internationally.

"The use of [herbal supplements](#) while breastfeeding is two-sided—there are benefits, but there are also safety concerns," she added. "About 18 percent of the US population use herbs and [dietary supplements](#). We just want to make sure physicians and clinicians are aware of this prevalent use when communicating with [breastfeeding mothers](#) about their health."

Herbal remedies may be used to increase the milk supply, relieve engorgement, treat mastitis, or for other therapeutic uses unrelated to lactation.

"Since there is very limited research, it is difficult to develop accurate information on the safety and effectiveness of specific herbs during [breastfeeding](#)," said Gardiner. "It is crucial that more research is conducted in this area, including national prevalence studies and safety and efficacy studies."

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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