

Dextromethorphan

This sheet is about exposure to dextromethorphan in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on available published literature. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is dextromethorphan?

Dextromethorphan is an over-the-counter medication that has been used to treat cough (cough suppressant). It comes in pill, liquid, and cough drop forms.

Dextromethorphan can be sold as a single medication and is also available in multi-symptom cold, cough, and flu medications. During pregnancy and while breastfeeding, it is suggested to avoid combination medications that contain multiple ingredients (when possible). Instead, it is suggested to choose single medications that treat the symptoms you have, unless otherwise directed by your healthcare provider. Also, some cold and cough liquid medications contain alcohol. If you need to take dextromethorphan during pregnancy, it is recommended to choose a product that does not contain alcohol.

Sometimes when women find out they are pregnant, they think about changing how they take their medication, or stopping their medication altogether. However, it is important to talk with your healthcare providers before making any changes to how you take this medication. Your healthcare providers can talk with you about the benefits of treating your condition and the risks of untreated illness during pregnancy.

I take dextromethorphan. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?

Studies have not been done to see if dextromethorphan can make it harder to get pregnant.

Does taking dextromethorphan increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. In one study looking at pregnancies of 128 women who took dextromethorphan in the first trimester of pregnancy, no increase in miscarriage was reported.

Does taking dextromethorphan increase the chance of birth defects?

Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at published data to try to understand if an exposure, like dextromethorphan, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. Dextromethorphan use in pregnancy is not expected to increase the chance of birth defects.

Does taking dextromethorphan in pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

One study looking at the infants of 184 women who took dextromethorphan anytime during pregnancy found no increased chance of stillbirth or low birthweight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth). Studies have not been done to see if dextromethorphan increases the chance for other pregnancy-related problems, such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37).

Does taking dextromethorphan in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Studies have not been done to see if dextromethorphan can cause behavior or learning issues for the child.

Breastfeeding while taking dextromethorphan:

One study looking at 20 women who were breastfeeding and took 1 dose of 30 mg of dextromethorphan found that the medication gets into breastmilk in small amounts. In this study, 1 baby had a rash that went away without treatment. It is not known if the rash was related to the medication in breastmilk or not. Because dextromethorphan appears to pass into breastmilk in small amounts, side effects in nursing children would not be expected. If you suspect the baby has any symptoms (such as a rash), contact the child's healthcare provider.

Some cough syrups with dextromethorphan contain alcohol, so it is important to review the label before using. Alcohol-free cough syrups are preferred while breastfeeding. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man takes dextromethorphan, could it affect fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Studies have not been done to see if dextromethorphan could affect a man's fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects above the background risk. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Selected References:

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