

Breast Pain

About breast pain

Some women fear that breast pain is associated with breast cancer. Breast pain (or mastalgia) is a relatively common breast change and most women at some stage in their lives will experience it¹. Any unusual pain that doesn't go away should be investigated by your doctor².

All women are at risk of developing breast cancer. However the greatest risk factor is increasing age, with over 75 per cent of breast cancers found in women over 50. Women of all ages should be familiar with the look and feel of their breasts so they can notice any changes and seek medical advice promptly if they are concerned.

Two types of breast pain

The most common type of breast pain is cyclical which occurs just prior to or during the menstrual period. This pain, which may vary in severity, is normal and relates to changes in hormone levels at this time.

Non-cyclical pain may come from the breast but is unrelated to the menstrual period. It is more common in older women before and after menopause. Women should talk to their doctor if a sharp or stabbing pain begins suddenly, continues and is confined to one spot in the breast.

Another form of non-cyclical pain comes from elsewhere in the body but may cause pain in the breast area. This type of pain often involves the bones, joints or muscles.

Main causes of breast pain

- Hormonal changes
- Pregnancy
- Weight gain
- Bra problems
- Infection of the breast (mastitis)
- Injury to the breast
- Arthritis pain or a pinched nerve in the neck area
- Inflammation of a rib joint
- Simple cysts
- Some forms of hormonal replacement therapy.

Hints to relieve breast pain

Here are some simple suggestions you may like to try if you suffer from breast pain:

Use of a bra – some women find that wearing a correctly fitted supportive bra at all times helps by reducing breast movement. Other women choose not to wear a bra at all or choose to wear a loose fitting or soft bra at night.

Dietary changes – reducing your caffeine (coffee, tea, cola and chocolate), salt and fat intakes can be helpful.

Natural supplements – some women have found that Vitamin B6 (pyridoxine) and B1 (thiamine) relieves breast pain. Evening Primrose Oil can also help to relieve pain or premenstrual symptoms. Check with your doctor or pharmacist about the recommended dose.

Applying heat or cold – the use of a hot water bottle or cold ice-pack helps some women. Otherwise, taking a cold or hot shower may be more effective.

Managing stress – stress appears to be influenced by hormone levels so relaxation and meditation can be helpful.

It may be useful to keep a record of your breast pain for a couple of months to see whether changes are regular. Note each day how bad the pain is on a scale from 1–5; what the pain is like and any changes in your diet or stressful events that have occurred. This information will help your doctor recommend simple and effective treatments if needed.

If you are concerned about any unusual persistent breast pain, you should talk to your doctor.

1. Breast Cancer Institute, Mastalgia, 2015, <https://www.bci.org.au/breast-cancer-information/fact-sheets/mastalgia/> (accessed 8.3.18)
2. Cancer Australia, Breast changes, 2017, <https://breast-cancer.canceraustralia.gov.au/awareness/breast-changes> (accessed 18.1.18)

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