

Breast Pain

I have breast pain.

Breast pain, also known as mastalgia, is very common. It is very rare for breast pain to be caused by cancer if there are no other symptoms. Breast pain may feel like a dull ache, tenderness, burning sensation, sharp pain, or uncomfortable sense of fullness.

Most women will have breast pain sometime during their life.

Types of breast pain

Pain related to hormonal changes is called cyclical breast pain. It usually involves both breasts, the entire breast or upper outer breast, and may include the underarm. It varies with the menstrual cycle, with greatest pain the week before your period and improves or goes away after your period. It can be associated with a lump, mass or swelling that goes away when the pain goes away. Cyclical pain may ‘move around.’ This type of pain can occur in women who are transitioning to menopause. It can be more difficult to identify as periods become less predictable. Women on hormone replacement after menopause can have cyclical pain.

Breast pain that is not part of the menstrual cycle is noncyclical pain. It is more common in women aged 40-50. It can occur before and after menopause, during pregnancy and breast-feeding. The pain usually involves only one breast and can be constant or come and go. The pain can come from muscle strain, a biopsy, infection, prior surgery, or an enlarged or inflamed cyst. Birth control pills, weight gain, water retention or a poor fitting bra can cause breast pain. In many cases, the cause of the pain may never be determined. Although breast cancer is usually not painful, when it does cause pain, the pain is often noncyclical. It is usually just in one main spot. Noncyclical breast pain may require more evaluation to determine the cause. Your doctor may order imaging tests such as mammogram and ultrasound.

When should you talk to your doctor?

- You have a lump in the area of pain that does not go away after your period.
- You have redness, swelling or drainage from the area (signs of infection).
- You have nipple discharge.
- Your breast pain is not clearly related to your menstrual cycle or lasts more than two weeks.

- Your breast pain is just in one spot and does not involve the whole breast.
- Your breast pain keeps getting worse.
- The pain is affecting your life and limiting what you can do.

If you are worried you should talk to your doctor about your symptoms.

What can you do?

- Keep a daily diary. Write down if you have pain and if it is mild, moderate or severe. Write down if both breasts are affected and where in the breast you feel the pain. Write down the first day of your menstrual period.
- Wear a good-fitting bra that provides good support. Wear a sports bra when you exercise. Your bra size can change over time. If in doubt, find a store that can fit you for a bra.
- Stay at a healthy weight. Ask your healthcare provider or a dietitian what a healthy weight is for you.
- Some women find their pain is less when they reduce or avoid caffeine and fatty foods. Caffeine is found in coffee, black and green tea, cola or other sodas, chocolate, cocoa, and some over the counter pain and cold medicines.
- Birth control hormones may cause, increase or decrease breast pain. Some women have breast pain for the first time when they start the birth control pill or change the dose or type of pill. If the pain does not decrease or go away after several cycles, call your healthcare provider. Ask about changing the dose or the brand.
- Hormone replacement therapy can bring on breast pain that often settles down after a few months. It can remain a problem for some women. If you think your pain is linked to hormone therapy, talk with your healthcare provider.
- Some women find that ice packs or heating pads help their pain. Try these to see if one works for you.
- Stress reducing and relaxation techniques may also help lessen symptoms of breast pain.
- Some over-the-counter, herbal and prescription medicines have been shown to help. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist about these options and if any are right for you.