



Beaumont Hospital

Patient Information
on

Breast Pain

What is breast pain?

Breast pain (mastalgia) is a very common problem affecting two out of every three women at some point in their lives. Like any other breast problem, it is often worrying. However breast pain alone is very rarely a symptom of breast cancer.

There are two types of breast pain -

- cyclical breast pain – where the pain is related to the menstrual cycle.
- non-cyclical breast pain – where the pain is not related to the menstrual cycle.

What is cyclical breast pain?

Cyclical breast pain is common. It is linked to changing hormone levels during the menstrual cycle. Generally the hormone levels build up during the two weeks leading up to a period and then fall rapidly once the period starts. These changes cause increased sensitivity in the breast which can result in a “burning”, “prickling”, “stabbing” or “drawing in type pain”.

Cyclical breast pain can affect just one breast or both. Sometimes the pain spreads into the arm, shoulder or back. If you have cyclical breast pain your breasts may also become larger, tender, and slightly lumpy in the week or so before a period. The pain can range from mild to severe and the breasts can be tender and sore to touch.

Cyclical breast pain can occur at any age after periods start, but it is most common between the ages of 30 and 50. Cyclical breast pain often decreases or disappears with pregnancy or menopause. Certain hormonal medications including infertility treatment and oral birth control pills may be associated with breast pain.

What is non- cyclical breast pain?

There are two types of non-cyclical breast pain.

1. Breast pain that comes from the breast but isn't linked to the menstrual cycle.
2. Extra-mammary breast pain that is felt in the area of the breast but is actually coming from elsewhere such as the muscles, bones and joints. This may be referred to as musculoskeletal pain.

Other causes of breast pain include:

- Breast size - women with large breasts may have non cyclical breast pain related to the size of their breasts. It may also be associated with neck, shoulder or back pain

The causes of non- cyclical breast pain are often unknown. It can sometimes be related to benign (non-cancerous) breast conditions, previous breast surgery or underlying conditions that are not related to the breasts for example inflammation of the small joints (costochondritis) that connect ribs to the breast bone.

What can you do to help?

- Wear a well fitting supportive bra, go to a trained bra fitter to ensure you are wearing the correct size, this service is available in most large department stores.
- Caffeine – If you drink a lot of tea, coffee or cola try the decaffeinated varieties.
- Dietary fats – reducing animal fats (such as butter, cream, fatty meat) and increasing your intake of fresh fruit and vegetables can help.

- Smoking is also thought to aggravate breast pain, so if you smoke you may find that your pain improves if you cut down or stop altogether
- Painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen may help. Topical non-steroidal anti-inflammatory creams or gels applied directly to the affected area may also work.
- There is evidence that having low levels of an essential fatty acid called gamma-linolenic acid (GLA) can contribute to cyclical breast pain. You may benefit by taking a supplement of Evening Primrose Oil capsules to reduce breast pain. This can be bought from health stores, pharmacies and supermarkets. The correct dose is 1000mg twice a day for 2-3 months. The dose can then gradually be reduced as you choose. *If you are pregnant or hoping to become pregnant, or if you are on medication for epilepsy, you must **NOT** take Evening Primrose oil capsules.*
- If your pain started when you began taking the contraceptive pill, changing to a low dose pill or a different brand may help.

What this means for you?

Breast pain can be distressing and many women are anxious that they may have breast cancer. In most cases breast pain is a result of normal changes that occur in the breast. Having breast pain does not increase your risk of developing breast cancer. However, it is very important to remain breast aware and to report any new changes to your Doctor.

Breast Awareness

Women of all ages should be breast aware.

Remember the **5** point breast awareness code

1. Know what is normal for you
2. Know what changes to look for
3. Look and feel
4. Discuss changes with your GP without delay
5. Attend for routine breast screening from aged 50 to 69

If you are aged between 50 and 69 you are eligible for Breast Check, the National Breast Screening Programme. If this is the case you should be on their register and an invitation will be sent in the post every 2 years with an appointment. If you are unsure if you are on the register or not, you can call BreastCheck on 1800 45 45 55 or check on-line at www.breastcheck.ie.

Issued date: Sept. 2009- Reviewed Jan 2017

Review Date: Jan 2019

Author(s): Breast Care Team Approved by: Breast Care Team