Breast Pain

This factsheet gives information on breast pain in women. It explains the different types and causes of breast pain and how it can be diagnosed and treated. We hope it answers some questions and concerns you may have. Remember that breast pain alone is rarely a symptom of breast cancer. For more information, call the National Cancer Helpline on freefone 1800 200 700 and speak to a specialist nurse in confidence.

What is breast pain?

Breast pain is a very common type of discomfort among women. It is also known as mastalgia. It is more common in younger women who are still having their periods. It can also be usual for some women to have breast pain for a few days before their period. For others, it can last up to 2 weeks. If it is severe, breast pain can affect your everyday activities, work and relationships. Breast pain alone is rarely a symptom of breast cancer.
What are the types of breast pain?

The two main types of breast pain are cyclical and non cyclical. Cyclical means it is related to your menstrual cycle (period), while non cyclical means it is not related to it. A third type of breast pain is chest wall pain. This is not true breast pain because the pain comes from the muscles, ribs or other tissues beneath your breasts.

Cyclical breast pain
- Is related to the menstrual cycle
- Is described as full, heavy or aching
- Can often occur with breast swelling or lumpiness
- Usually affects both your breasts, particularly the upper, outer areas, and can spread to your underarm
- Is most painful during the two weeks before your period, but eases afterwards
- Usually affects women in their 20s and 30s, but also women in their 40s and going through the menopause

Non-cyclical breast pain
- Is not related to the menstrual cycle
- Is described as tight, burning or sore
- Is constant or comes and goes
- Usually affects one breast, in one area, but may spread across your breast
- Usually affects women in their 40s and 50s and after the menopause

Chest wall pain
This type of pain can come from outside your breast, the chest wall, muscles, joints or heart, but can feel like it is in your breast. A condition called costochondritis can also be the cause. This is when your chest wall becomes inflamed and sore. The pain comes from the cartilage that connects your ribs to your breastbone and not from your breast itself. But sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference. Your breast can be painful and tender when touched.

What causes breast pain?

There are many causes of breast pain. Sometimes breast pain and tenderness are normal. For example:
- During pregnancy, especially in the first three months (trimester)
- In puberty in both girls and boys
- During breastfeeding
- Before the menopause

Some possible causes include:
- Hormones
- Size and make-up of your breast
- Fatty acid imbalance
- Medications
- Other causes

Hormones: Cyclical breast pain is caused when the breast tissue becomes sensitive to hormones. Breast tissue responds to the female hormones that control your period. When an egg is released (ovulation), the hormones build up and then decrease at the start of your period.

Size and make-up of your breast: The cause of non-cyclical breast pain can also be due to the make-up of the breast itself. For example, if you have had an injury to your breast or previous breast surgery. If you have large breasts, you may have breast pain related mainly to the size of your breasts. You can often get neck, shoulder and back pain with this type of breast discomfort.

Fatty acid imbalance: Fatty acids are found in many vegetable and animal oils. An imbalance of fatty acids within your cells can make your
breast tissue more sensitive to hormones. For this reason, evening primrose oil is often used as a remedy for breast pain. It contains gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), a type of fatty acid.

**Medications:** Some hormone medications may be linked to breast pain. This includes infertility treatments and oral contraceptives. Also, breast tenderness is a possible side-effect of oestrogen and progesterone hormone therapy. This may explain why some women still have breast pain even after the menopause. Breast pain can also be a side-effect of some antidepressants.

**Other non-cyclical causes:** An infection in your breast (mastitis) due to breastfeeding, fibrocystic breast disease, and liver disease due to alcoholism can all result in breast pain.

### When should I see my doctor?

Make an appointment to see your family doctor (GP) if:

- Your breast pain persists daily for more than a couple of weeks
- Your breast pain seems to be getting worse over time
- You have pain in one particular area of your breast
- Your breast pain interferes with your daily activities

If you are still having periods, make an appointment for about 3 to 5 days after your period, if possible.

Do make a list of all medications, vitamins and supplements that you take regularly. You can also write down any questions you would like to ask your doctor.

### How is breast pain diagnosed?

Your doctor may start by asking you some of the following questions:

- How long have you had the breast pain?
- How severe is your pain on a scale of 1 to 10?

- Does the pain occur in one or both breasts?
- Do you have other symptoms, such as a breast lump, thickened area, or nipple discharge?
- Do you have skin changes, such as redness or a rash?

### What tests might I need?

**Breast exam:** Your doctor will check your breasts and the lymph nodes (glands) in your lower neck and underarm. He or she may also listen to your heart and lungs and check your chest wall and tummy (abdomen). This is to make sure that the pain comes from your breast and is not related to some other condition. If your medical history and exam seem normal, you may not need any more tests.

**Mammogram:** This is an X-ray exam of your breast tissue. It is not usually done for breast pain, unless your doctor finds a breast lump or unusual thickening.

**Ultrasound:** An ultrasound exam uses sound waves to look at your breast tissue.

**Breast biopsy:** If any suspicious breast lumps or thickened or unusual areas are seen on the X-rays, a biopsy may be needed. A biopsy can help your doctor to make a diagnosis. A needle is used to take a sample of the breast tissue from the area. This is then sent to the laboratory and examined.

It is very rare for these tests to be carried out for breast pain.
How is breast pain treated?

Some healthy lifestyle changes and self-care remedies can help you manage your breast pain. In very severe cases, your doctor may prescribe medication.

When you work out what is causing the pain, you can often get rid of the problem. For example, it may involve a simple change, such as wearing a bra with extra support. Or it may need a bigger change, such as your doctor changing your contraceptive.

1. Lifestyle and simple measures
   - Stop smoking. Smoking can inflame your breasts and increase breast pain.
   - Put hot or cold compresses on your breasts while relaxing.
   - Wear a firm support bra, fitted by a professional if possible. Do wear a sports bra during exercise and while sleeping, especially when your breasts are more sensitive.
   - Limit or avoid caffeine in your diet. This includes tea, coffee and coke.
   - Reduce the fat in your diet. This may help your breast pain by changing the fatty acid balance. Also, cut down on your salt intake and eat more fresh fruit and vegetables.
   - Keep a pain chart of your breast pain. This will help you find out if your pain is cyclical or non-cyclical. There is one at the back of this factsheet.

2. Treatments and drugs

Breast pain often clears up within a few months with the help of the above simple measures. If not, you may need medication prescribed by your doctor. For example:
   - You may be prescribed an oral contraceptive or the dose might be adjusted if you are already taking one.
   - If you are taking hormone therapy after the menopause, the dose may need to be reduced or the drug stopped completely.
   - Painkillers, such as paracetamol, or anti-inflammatories can help. Discuss with your doctor which one may be best for you.
   - If your breast pain is very severe, your doctor may prescribe other medication.

3. Complementary therapies

Vitamins and dietary supplements may help lessen the symptoms and severity of your breast pain.

Techniques such as relaxation, yoga and acupuncture may also be helpful. Discuss with your doctor which may be best for you.
   - **Supplements:** Evening primrose oil works by changing the balance of fatty acids in your body, which may reduce breast pain. Some doctors recommend taking a 1,000mg capsule up to 3 times a day. If you try a supplement for breast pain, stop taking it if there is no improvement in your breast pain after 3 months.
   - **Relaxation/visualisation** can involve an audiotape or a therapist guiding you to find peaceful and healing pictures in your mind. This can help bring a sense of relaxation and calm and may help reduce your breast pain by reducing stress.
   - **Yoga** uses stretching exercises and poses, with special attention given to breathing and meditation. It can help to calm and balance your body and reduce stress. Some find it helpful in reducing breast pain.
   - **Acupuncture** is based on the belief that energy flows throughout your body. Very thin needles are placed at particular points in your body, which is said to rebalance energy flow and in turn can relieve pain.

Emotional support

If your breast pain is very severe, it can affect your everyday activities, work and relationships. Do seek help if your breast pain is severe and causing ongoing problems in your life. Talking to your partner or a close friend may help. You can also discuss it with your GP who may recommend further help if needed.
BREAST PAIN CHART

THIS CHART IS INTENDED TO HELP YOU AND YOUR GP/NURSE TO SEE WHEN YOUR BREAST PAIN OCCURS. RECORD THE AMOUNT OF BREAST PAIN YOU EXPERIENCE EACH DAY BY SHADING IN EACH BOX AS ILLUSTRATED.

FOR EXAMPLE: IF YOU GET SEVERE BREAST PAIN ON THE FIFTH DAY OF THE MONTH THE SHADE COMPLETELY THE SQUARE UNDER 5. PLEASE NOT THE DAY YOUR PERIOD STARTS EACH MONTH WITH THE LETTER P.
USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

Breast Cancer Care UK
Website: www.breastcancercare.org.uk/breast-cancer-breast-health/breast-awareness/

Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada
Website: www.sogc.org/health/pdf/breast-pain3_e.pdf

Health Promotion HSE
Website: www.healthpromotion.ie

Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute
Ashgrove House
Kill Avenue
Dún Laoghaire
Co Dublin
Tel: 01 280 4839
Email: info@indi.ie
Website: www.indi.ie

FURTHER INFORMATION
For more information on breast pain, call the National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700
(Monday–Friday, 9am–7pm; Friday 9am–5pm)
or email helpline@irishcancer.ie for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists.

Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
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Fax: (01) 231 0555
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
Website: www.cancer.ie

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