

Understanding Your Breast Pain

Breast pain is very common in women of all ages. Two out of three women will have breast pain at some time in their lives. Breast pain like any other breast symptom can cause a great deal of anxiety. Not knowing what causes the symptoms often makes the pain worse. Like any other breast problem, it can be worrying, but on its own it is not usually a sign of breast cancer. Having breast pain does not increase your risk of breast cancer. Understanding more about your breast pain may be helpful.

Types of Breast Pain

There are three types of breast pain.

- Cyclical breast pain: pain that is part of a woman's normal menstrual cycle (periods).
- Non-cyclical breast pain: lasting pain that is not related to the menstrual cycle.
- Chest wall pain: pain that feels like it is in the breast but is coming from the chest wall under the breast.

Cyclical Breast Pain

Hormone levels change during the menstrual cycle. This makes the breast tissue more sensitive, which can cause pain. Two out of three women will experience cyclical breast pain. Many women feel discomfort and lumpiness in both breasts a week or so before their period. The pain can vary from mild to severe. The breasts can also be tender and sore to touch. The pain usually affects both breasts but it can affect just one breast. It can also spread to the armpit, down the arm and to the shoulder blade. Cyclical breast pain often goes away once a period starts.

Cyclical breast pain usually stops after menopause. However, women taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after their menopause can also have breast pain. Starting or changing birth control pills can also be associated with this type of breast pain.

Non-Cyclical Breast Pain

Non-cyclical breast pain is not linked to the menstrual cycle. It may be continuous or it may come and go. It can affect women before and after menopause. The pain can be in one or both breasts. Non-cyclical breast pain often improves or goes away by itself over time. It is often unclear what causes non-cyclical breast pain, but it can be related to:

- A benign (not cancer) breast condition.
- Previous surgery to the breast.
- Unrecognized trauma to the breast.
- Having larger breasts.
- A side effect from a drug treatment, such as certain antidepressant drugs and some herbal remedies such as ginseng.
- Stress and anxiety.

Post-surgical pain is pain that lasts more than 3-6 months after surgery. The pain is different from the pain you have during surgery or right after surgery. This type of pain is usually caused by injury to a nerve during surgery. Breast surgeries have a higher risk of causing nerve damage and post-surgical pain. There are various options for treating this kind of pain such as oral medications, anesthetics or nerve stimulation therapy.

Chest Wall Pain

Chest wall pain may feel as though it is coming from the breast, but really it comes from somewhere else. It can be caused by:

- Pulling a muscle in your chest.
- Inflammation around the ribs.
- A medical condition, such as angina or gallstones.

The pain can be on one side, in a specific area or around a wide area of the breast. It may spread down the arm and can be worse when you move. This type of pain can also be felt if pressure is applied to the area on the chest wall.

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.

If at any time you notice a new lump, with or without pain, tell your primary care provider.