

Breast pain

Mamae ū

Breast pain (the medical name is mastalgia) is a common problem, experienced by most women at some time in their lives.

If you experience breast pain, it isn't usually any reason to worry, as most breast pain is caused by hormonal changes rather than breast cancer or other serious problems. But if you're worried about the pain, see your general practice team for a check-up.

You need to see your general practice team urgently if you notice any skin or nipple changes, discharge from your nipples or a lump in your breast whether or not you have breast pain.



Young boys and men can also experience pain in the breast area. Sometimes this pain can occur at the same time as enlargement of the breast tissue (called gynaecomastia). In older men, gynaecomastia may develop with the use of certain medications. Any discomfort usually gets better after three to six months.

Causes of breast pain

Some breast pain in women is caused by hormonal changes related to the menstrual cycle (your period). This is called cyclical breast pain and is most common in women between the ages of 30 and 50. This type of pain usually comes in the days before your period and gets better when your period begins. It usually affects both breasts, making them feel more swollen and lumpier during this time. The pain may vary from one month to the next.

Pain that isn't linked to your period cycle is called non-cyclical breast pain. You may have this pain all the time or it can come and go. It may be in one or both breasts. It may occur for several reasons.

The contraceptive pill, Depo-Provera injection, progesterone implants and menopause hormone therapy (MHT) can cause breast pain in some women due to the hormonal effects of these medications. Pregnancy is also a common cause of breast pain or tenderness due to a rise in hormone levels. Breastfeeding may cause breasts to become sore.



Older women sometimes get breast pain that isn't caused by hormones but can be related to menopause. Often no cause can be found but occasionally cysts or age-related changes to the milk ducts can be the problem.

Pain from the chest wall muscles or cartilage under the breast can also be a cause of non-cyclical breast pain.

It's very rare for breast pain to be caused by cancer.

Self-care for breast pain

Most breast pain will go away on its own without any need for treatment, but there are a few simple ideas you can try. See your general practice team if you feel no improvement after three months of trying these ideas or if you're worried.

- Wear a well-fitting and supportive bra. For example, a sports bra. It's a good idea to avoid under-wires. Most underwear shops or underwear departments provide a bra-fitting service by trained staff.
- Avoid jolting, jarring or high-impact activities such as running for a few months to see if this helps.
- Make some changes in your diet by:
 - increasing the amount of soy products you eat and drink
 - reducing the amount of caffeine and salt you consume (tea, coffee, soft drinks, energy drinks and some over-the-counter medicines all contain caffeine).
- Use a rub-on anti-inflammatory gel.
- Talk to your general practice team about stopping or changing contraceptives or other hormone medications. For example, some people find that their symptoms improve when they're taking an oral contraceptive pill, while for others, the contraceptive pill makes their symptoms worse.
- You could try evening primrose oil. There are no studies proving this works, but some women have found it helpful for breast pain.
- Use a Breast pain calendar to keep a record of when you feel pain and what the pain feels like. This is a useful way to see any patterns, to see if treatment is working and to find out if your breast pain is related to your period. Take the completed calendar to your doctor's appointments. To find a breast pain calendar, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz and search for "breast pain".

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed July 2022.