

# Breast pain

## INFECTIONS AND INFLAMMATION

### In women producing breast milk

After giving birth to a baby, a woman's breasts fill up with milk and this can be a period of breast pain as the milk supply builds up. For women not breastfeeding their baby, their breasts can become tender and perhaps very painful and swollen in the first week after the birth. Occasionally an infection or inflammation can occur at this time. Medication is sometimes given to stop milk production.

Women who are breastfeeding can get an infection called mastitis, which is most common in the first six weeks of breastfeeding, but can happen at any time. Usually the woman initially feels like she has the 'flu', then an area of the breast will become red, painful, tender, hot to the touch, and perhaps lumpy and hard.

The breast may be inflamed because a milk duct is blocked, and if the blockage clears (sometimes by getting your baby to feed in a different position, or by massaging the area gently to express milk in the shower), the situation can resolve without other treatment.

In cases where the inflammation develops into an infection, the woman may feel quite unwell with a fever, headache and general aches and pains. In these cases an antibiotic is usually needed. Sometimes a collection of pus (abscess) can develop and this may need to be drained surgically. The woman should continue to breastfeed her baby.

### In other women (not lactating)

Some women from their 20s to 40s develop a breast infection or inflammation due to debris spilling from the breast ducts into the surrounding tissue. It often occurs close to the nipple and causes pain, redness and swelling of the breast tissue. Sometimes a lump is also noted. This type of infection can recur and is more common in smokers. Antibiotics are usually given. Investigations may need to be done to exclude a more serious underlying problem. Women with large breasts can get an infection or rash on the skin under the breasts in the moist skin fold and this can be painful.

## HORMONAL CAUSES

### Premenstrual breast pain (cyclical mastalgia)

A varying degree of breast pain, swelling and tenderness can occur in the week or two before a woman's period. The breasts may feel generally lumpy, and nipples may be very tender.

Some women have very severe pain, and these women usually have other more severe premenstrual symptoms (PMS). Severe breast pain before the period has been associated with a higher dietary fat intake. The breast pain may interfere with daily activities such as exercise, sexual activity, work or school. Medication can be prescribed, so see your doctor. Studies have shown that some natural therapies such as evening primrose oil can be helpful.

### Pregnancy

Swelling and tenderness of the breasts can be an early symptom of pregnancy. If a period is missed you or your doctor can easily do a pregnancy test.

If you notice a new lump in the breast during your pregnancy, be sure to get medical advice. This is because the increased hormonal activity of pregnancy that helps the baby to develop also causes any tumours to develop more quickly and rarely this could be a cancer.

### Women on hormones

Women on the contraceptive pill or those on HRT (hormone replacement therapy) can get tender, sore, swollen breasts from the oestrogen in these medications. This usually settles in a month or two or your doctor can adjust the dosage.

### Chest wall pain

Sometimes pain can seem to be in the breast, but it is actually coming from the bones, joints or muscles of the chest wall. Sometimes chest pain can indicate a serious problem in the lungs or heart. Shingles (herpes zoster infection) of the chest can start as pain (before the rash appears). A pain in the chest may also come from the stomach, the gullet (oesophagus) or the spine. Any pain in the chest should always be checked out by your doctor.

### Pain in the male breast

It is common for boys to get tender buds of breast tissue during adolescence. This is usually not severe and passes with time. Men can also get breast lumps, which can be benign or very rarely cancer. If a lump is found in either sex, it should be

checked.

Swollen or tender breasts can occur in men because of being overweight, drinking too much alcohol, liver disease, and taking certain medications. A check up with the doctor is strongly advised.

If you have any concerns about breast pain, talk to your GP.