

Painful breasts

What causes breast pain?

Breast pain (known as *mastalgia*) has several causes. The main type of breast pain is cyclical mastalgia, which is a general breast discomfort that occurs in the second half of the menstrual cycle. The pain, which comes on with ovulation, is mainly premenstrual. It obviously is caused by a hormonal effect and is not harmful.

Other causes are:

- pregnancy
- infection (after childbirth)
- tumours
- certain drugs
- weight gain
- bra problems

Note: Early breast cancer is usually painless, but all lumps need careful investigation.

Is it common?

It is a very common problem, with about 2 out of 3 women complaining of breast pain at some stage of their lives. It is most common in the 30s and early 40s.

What are the symptoms?

The pain can vary from very mild to severe. It is usually a heaviness or discomfort in the breasts, while some women experience a prickling or stabbing sensation.

The breasts may be so tender that relationships with partners and children are affected because hugging and fondling cause distress. The breasts may feel lumpy or quite normal to touch. The lumpy breast may develop cysts, which your doctor may drain.

What is the treatment?

The first thing to keep in mind is that breast pain is common, and only 1 case in 200 will have cancer as the cause. However, you must continue to practise breast self-examination and report any lumps that do not go away after your periods. You do not have to live with your breast discomfort.

Self-help

- Reduce weight if you are overweight: aim to keep at ideal weight.
- Reduce or cut out caffeine.
- Follow a nutritious diet.
- Wear good quality, comfortable bras.
- Take 2 aspirin or other mild analgesic for pain.
- Exercise aerobically and exercise the upper trunk.

'Natural' medication

Vitamins may help (although this is not scientifically proven):

- Vitamin B1: 100 mg per day
- Vitamin B6: 100 mg per day
- Evening primrose oil capsules: 4 g per day

Most women (85%) can be treated with natural methods. Your doctor can prescribe stronger medication to relieve the problem, so report persistent pain or any persistent lumps.

Drug treatment

Adjustment of oral contraception or hormone replacement therapy (if it applies to you) may help mastalgia. However, there are several other hormones that can be prescribed.