Dear colleague,

This patient has been referred into the breast unit outside of recommended guidelines. The GM Cancer Alliance Breast Pathway Board no longer recommend Secondary Care referral for mastalgia (breast pain) unless all conservative measures have been exhausted in Primary Care.

Mastalgia is very common and occurs in around 70% of women during their lifetime. It is a normal physiological process of dynamic breast tissue or a non-breast symptom, such as costochondritis of the underlying chest wall.

We know that mastalgia alone is not a symptom of breast cancer. Women with mastalgia who are referred to a breast clinic often receive unnecessary examination and diagnostic tests which cause unnecessary patient anxiety.

Here is the advice we recommend GP’s give to patients with mastalgia:

* Wear a well-fitted supportive bra – please ensure you have had a professional bra-fitting recently (most department stores and underwear shops provide this service free-of-charge)
* Topical, non-steroidal gels (such as ibuprofen gel) can be applied directly to the painful area 2-3 times per day for 3-4 weeks allowing the gel to dry before getting dressed
* Tiger balm is a good natural alternative if you cannot use anti-inflammatory gels and should be applied in the same way. This can be purchased from most pharmacies
* If your pain is related to starting the oral contraceptive pill/ hormone replacement therapy (HRT), please discuss this further with your GP

We hope that you find this information reassuring and that it helps to support your decision-making when seeing a patient with mastalgia without red flags in the future.

Kind regards

Greater Manchester Cancer Alliance Breast Pathway Board

Resources and information

Gandhi et al (Manchester University Foundation Trust WTWA) have recently published a prospective cohort study of 10,830 consecutive patients referred from primary care. This revealed 1,972 (18%) of referrals were for mastalgia alone. In this cohort of patients the cancer incidence rate was 0.4%. This compared to ~5% in the 82% of patients referred into clinic with non-mastalgia symptoms and 1% in the NHS Breast Screening Programme of asymptomatic women. This study therefore suggests there is no association between mastalgia and breast cancer.

There are some useful tools and education videos on the GM Cancer Alliance website which may help you with clinical decision making. Managing mastalgia - <https://youtu.be/CwwusCQKIyw>

GM cancer pathway for the management of mastalgia - <https://gmcancer.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GM-Cancer-Pathway-for-Management-of-Mastalgia-V1.0-21Jul2021.pdf>