NHS
Greater Manchester
Cancer Alliance

Breast pain

This leaflet will help explain your breast pain and give you some tips on how to manage it.

Why do my breasts hurt?

It is normal for women to get some breast pain. It happens to around 7 out of 10 women at some point in their lives. Breast pain is unpleasant to live with but is not usually due to anything serious. Breast pain is NOT usually a sign of breast cancer.

Types of breast pain

Cyclical pain: related to your menstrual cycle (period)

This type of breast pain happens in the run up to your monthly period. It is caused by normal changes in hormone levels. The pain can be dull, achy or heavy. Cyclical pain is usually felt in both breasts, but can be felt on just one side and can spread to the armpit. It doesn't tend to affect women whose periods have stopped.

Non-cyclical pain: not related to your periods

This pain can be constant and there is no link to your monthly hormone changes. It can be a burning or sore pain in one or both breasts.

Chest wall pain

For the majority of patients, although the pain feels like it is coming from the breast, it is actually coming from the ribs or muscles of the chest wall underneath the breast. The pain can be intermittent or constant and can be an ache, shooting pain, tenderness or burning sensation.

What can I do to help the pain?

Reassurance

Being told by a health care professional that the pain is not caused by a serious illness, often provides reassurance and peace of mind and sometimes makes it easier to deal with the pain.

Bra fitting

It is thought that many women wear a bra that does not fit correctly. Visit a local department store or specialist bra shop that offers different makes and models of bra to be fitted correctly. It is important to try on different bra styles (in the correct size) to find one that best supports your breast shape. For many women, wearing a supportive sports bra can provide comfort, but other women prefer a more traditional bra style. You may need to wear your professionally fitted bra for six weeks before you feel a benefit.

Exercise

If you are able, regular exercise, whilst wearing a 'high impact' sports bra, for 30 minutes 3 times a week, can reduce breast pain. Don't forget that you need to be fitted for a sports bra to ensure you are wearing the correct size.

Pain relief creams

Research has shown that 80% (8 out of 10) of women find that anti-inflammatory gels and creams improve their breast pain. We suggest using ibuprofen or diclofenac gel which can be bought at your local pharmacy. We advise that you apply the gel to the painful area 2-3 times per day for 3-4 weeks. It is important to allow the gel to dry before getting dressed. You may also like to try tiger balm as an alternative to the medical gels. This should be applied in the same way as the anti-inflammatory gels.

Be breast aware

You should continue to check your breasts even though they are sore. If you have pain that comes and goes, try to work out when your breasts are less sore and check them then. Breast pain, without other breast changes, is NOT usually a sign of breast cancer. However, if you notice any of the following changes, you should contact your GP:

- A new lump in the breast or armpit
- Skin dimpling / change to breast shape
- New in-drawing of your nipple
- Clear or blood-stained nipple discharge that comes out without squeezing

Is there anything else to know?

Contraceptive pills, implants and injections and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can make breast pain worse for some women. If you have recently started contraceptives or HRT, and feel this has made your pain worse, please contact your GP to discuss an alternative.

What about the things I have read online?

Current research shows that there is little evidence to prove the effectiveness of:

- Evening primrose oil
- Vitamins
- Reduction in coffee and chocolate
- Reduction fatty foods intake
- Eating soya

This is likely to be because the vast majority of 'breast pain' is not true breast pain but chest wall inflammation.

This information can be made available in alternative formats, such as easy read or large print, and may be available in alternative languages, upon request.
Please contact the team by email on: gmcancer.comms@nhs.net, or by writing to: The Greater Manchester Cancer Alliance, c/o The Christie NHS Foundation Trust, Wilmslow Road, Manchester M20 4BX.

This information leaflet has been developed by the Greater Manchester Cancer Alliance in collaboration with Manchester Foundation Trust.

NHS Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust

CS56843 NHS Creative 2024