

Breast Problems That Aren't Breast Cancer



Introduction

Breast cancer awareness is important, but so is **breast health awareness**.

Your breast health is personal and unique to you. It's your duty to be proactive and make sure you're aware of changes in your body.

Breast lumps are common and not always associated with breast cancer. They can exist due to other underlying breast problems that you may not know about. More women have benign (non-cancerous) breast problems than cancer. The importance of screening for breast cancer or breast problems cannot be overstated.

This eBook can help provide you with more information on the most common types of breast problems that are not breast cancer. Upon discovery of a lump or breast change, it can be natural to feel afraid or worried. We hope the knowledge in this eBook helps empower you to prevail over fear and take action.

REMEMBER: The most important message for anyone is to not ignore breast lumps, breast pain, or any breast changes. If you notice changes or feel anything new (firmness or lump) in your breasts, see your doctor. If you know what the breast problem is, you can either get it treated or have peace of mind.

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What are Benign Breast Problems?

Benign breast problems are problems in the breast that are **not** cancer. Benign breast problems can go away on their own or are easily treated. The most common benign breast problems are cysts, benign masses, and infections.

You can get benign breast problems at any time, regardless if you've had breast cancer or not. Staying proactive with screening protocols—[breast self-exams](#), [clinical exams](#), and [mammograms](#)—is important for your overall breast health.

Many benign breast problems are related to hormones and found in premenopausal women. If you're in menopause and notice breast problems or changes, it's especially important to consult your doctor to rule out potential breast cancer.

Benign breast problems typically present as either **pain** or a **lump**. Benign breast problems may be found with a mammogram and/or ultrasound of the breast. They may not be palpable, but a mammogram can show the breast problem.

The most important thing to remember is not to ignore breast problems. Anytime you feel a lump, pain, or breast changes, talk to your doctor.

You should be diligent any time you notice an abnormal breast change, no matter your age^[1]. Young women can get breast cancer - it's not common, but possible, which is why being proactive with your health and knowing your body is key.

If you notice any changes in your breast(s), see the Appendix for important information you should discuss with your doctor.

Types of Benign Breast Problems

Breast Pain

What is it?

Breast pain is any discomfort, tenderness, or pain in the breast or underarm region, and it may occur for a number of reasons.

What causes it?

Generally, breast pain is not a sign of breast cancer. If you're experiencing breast pain, speak with your primary care physician or gynecologist.

Breast pain almost always goes away. It can be tied to activity, menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, or certain medications. Also, some women have lumpy breast tissue called fibrocystic breasts, which may be more painful during certain times of the month.

How is it diagnosed & treated?

Your doctor may perform an ultrasound and/or mammogram for breast pain to be sure it's not breast cancer. If you're uneasy or your doctor doesn't want to proceed with screenings, seek a second opinion.

Breast cancer doesn't typically present as pain until more advanced. If your cancer is more advanced and causing pain, it could be that the tumor is pushing on organ structures or hitting nerves. That's more consistent with locally advanced breast cancer. (Locally advanced breast cancer includes breast pain as a symptom, but has other distinct symptoms as well, such as a large mass and abnormal axillary lymph nodes)

Your doctor may recommend temporary solutions for breast pain like Vitamin E, evening primrose oil, [wearing a supportive bra](#), or taking a pain reliever. Unfortunately, there is no true cure for breast pain.

Benign Breast Mass

What is it?

A benign breast mass is a mass on the breast that's not cancer. You may hear it called a mass, a growth, or a tumor. The most common benign breast mass is the **benign fibroadenoma**.

What causes it?

Fibroadenomas, similar to cysts, are related to hormones. These are most often seen in women during puberty through their twenties, and are often related to birth control. Starting birth control, changing birth control, pregnancy, and breastfeeding can cause fibroadenomas.

What are the symptoms?

A fibroadenoma feels like a hard, round lump in the breast. They move easily and typically don't hurt.

How is it diagnosed & treated?

Fibroadenomas can be monitored by your doctor with [an ultrasound](#) every six months, for two years. You can also [biopsy](#) a fibroadenoma, but you will still need to follow with an ultrasound to make sure it's not changing or growing. It's recommended to get a fibroadenoma removed if it's growing, changing, or causing pain.

Breast Cyst

What is it?

A breast cyst is a fluid-filled sac that develops in the breast tissue. You can think of a cyst like a water balloon. Any woman, at any age, can have cysts.

There are a few different types of common breast cysts.

- A single fluid-filled sac is called a **simple cyst**.
- A bunch of cysts next to each other are called **complicated cysts**. Sometimes complicated cysts can be described like a bunch of grapes.
- A cyst that has a very small mass inside is called a **complex cyst**. These are less common. If you have a complex cyst, a biopsy may be recommended.

What causes it?

Breast cysts are typically related to hormones. You most often see breast cysts in women of reproductive years and premenopausal. They can fluctuate with your menstrual cycle, too.

Not everybody has breast cysts, but many women get them. Because they are related to hormones, you can't prevent breast cysts from happening. Most people's breast cyst issues will go away in menopause because that's when hormone levels decrease.

What are the symptoms?

A breast cyst can feel like a lump. A breast cyst may be painful just before your menstrual cycle begins. Some cysts may be felt, while others are too small to be felt. If you have a cyst, you may notice that it comes and goes depending on the hormone cycle of menstruation.

How is it diagnosed & treated?

Since breast cysts are related to hormones, there's nothing an individual can do to get rid of their cysts.

Sometimes breast cysts cause pain. If the cyst is big enough to cause pain, your doctor can perform an aspiration. An aspiration is where local anesthesia is applied to the skin and a needle is inserted into the cyst to draw out fluid. It's like collapsing a water balloon. After an aspiration, the pain from the cyst is almost instantaneously gone.

Other than pain, breast cysts don't cause any problems. Simple cysts are not associated with a higher risk of cancer.

Mastitis

What is it?

Mastitis is an infection of the breast.

What causes it?

Mastitis can occur for various reasons. It is most common among women who are breastfeeding and is caused when a milk duct becomes blocked and infected.

If you smoke, you're prone to periductal mastitis, which is inflammation and infection around the nipple areola. This can be related to the impact of smoking on blood vessels.

If you have diabetes, you're prone to mastitis due to poor blood supply. Diabetes over time causes a decrease in the size of the small blood vessels and can cause infections.

What are the symptoms?

Mastitis typically presents with symptoms, the most common being breast pain, redness, lumpy, warm, and tender breasts. Other symptoms include fever and chills.

How is it diagnosed & treated?

Mastitis is typically diagnosed with exams and imaging, including ultrasound or mammogram.

Depending on the severity, mastitis can typically be treated with antibiotics. A surgical procedure is not typically involved with mastitis.

Abscess

What is it?

A breast abscess is a fluid collection or pus pocket in the breast.

What causes it?

Typically, a breast abscess is a result of untreated mastitis.

What are the symptoms?

A breast abscess can be very painful. It can present as a red, painful, swollen lump in the breast. You may notice pus draining out of the lump if you push on it and there is a skin opening. Other symptoms include fever and chills.

How is it diagnosed & treated?

Abscesses are typically diagnosed with an ultrasound.

Since an abscess is typically associated with mastitis, neither will get better until the fluid is removed.

Small abscesses may be able to be treated with antibiotics alone. However, most abscesses will require a surgical procedure such as multiple aspirations (draining of fluid) or incision and drainage, which is an incision through the breast into the abscess cavity. This allows the fluid to drain so the area can heal.

Most surgical procedures are typically done in a doctor's office. In severe cases, you could potentially require surgery for definitive treatment.

Reminder: These are all benign breast problems and not associated with breast cancer, however, you and your doctor still have to assess your own [breast cancer risk factors](#) (family history, BRCA gene mutations, etc.)

Appendix

1) Common Breast Changes

Most women have changes in their breasts at different times during their lifetime.

- **Before or during your menstrual period**, your breasts may feel swollen, tender, or painful. You may also feel more lumps during this time because of extra fluid in your breasts. Your doctor may have you come back for a return visit at a different time in your menstrual cycle to see if the lump has changed.
- **During pregnancy**, your breasts may feel lumpy. This is usually because the glands that produce milk are increasing in number and getting larger.
- **As you approach menopause**, your hormone levels change. This can make your breasts feel tender, even when you are not having your menstrual period. Your breasts may also feel more lumpy than they did before.
- **If you are taking hormones** (such as menopausal hormone therapy, birth control pills, or injections) your breasts may become [more dense](#). This can make a mammogram harder to interpret. Be sure to let your doctor know if you are taking hormones.
- **After menopause**, your hormone levels drop. You may stop having any lumps, pain, or nipple discharge that you used to have.

If you notice any changes in your breast, this is the information you should discuss with your health care provider:

These are the breast changes or problems I have noticed:

This is what the breast change looks or feels like: (Is the lump hard or soft? Does your breast feel tender or swollen? How big is the lump? What color is the nipple discharge?)

This is where the breast change is: (What part of the breast feels different? Do both breasts feel different or only one?)

This is when I first noticed the breast change:

Since then, this is the change I've noticed: (Has it stayed the same or gotten worse?)

Right now, I:

Have breast implants

Am breastfeeding

Am pregnant

Am on hormonal therapy

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Meghan Hansen, M.D.



Specialty

Breast Surgery

Certifications

- Board Certified – General Surgery
- Hidden Scar Certificate of Training

Professional Education

- **Fellowship in Breast Surgical Oncology**
The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, TX
- **Residency in General Surgery**
University of Missouri School of Medicine, Columbia, MO
- **Internship in General Surgery**
University of Missouri School of Medicine, Columbia, MO
- **Medical Doctorate**
University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, Iowa City, IA

Honors And Memberships

- American College of Surgery
- American Society of Breast Surgery
- American Society of Clinical Oncology
- National Breast Cancer Foundation Medical Professional of the Year nominee, 2018
- Society of Surgical Oncology

Personal

Dr. Hansen is married and has three children. She is originally from Iowa and moved to Texas in 2015. Outside of work, she enjoys hiking, camping, and spending time with her family.

Sources: National Cancer Institute