

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

FIBROCYSTIC BREAST CHANGES**WHAT IS IT?**

Fibrocystic breast changes refer to breast tissue that feels lumpy or rope-like in texture. Breast pain may also be present. Though symptoms can be distressing, fibrocystic breast changes are considered a normal physiologic response to hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle. Therefore, this condition is no longer referred to as “fibrocystic breast disease”. Having fibrocystic breasts also does not increase the risk of breast cancer.

HOW COMMON IS IT?

Fibrocystic breast changes affect more than 50% of women at some point in their lives. Symptoms typically occur between the ages of 20 and 50. It is rare to have symptoms during menopause, unless it is from hormone therapy.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Breast pain and/or lumps due to fibrocystic changes usually occur in both breasts.

- Symptoms are typically cyclical, appearing in the week prior to the start of your period and resolving around the time your period begins. Cyclical breast pain is not usually caused by breast cancer or other serious breast problems.
- Fibrocystic breast pain is often diffuse. However, symptoms may be more noticeable in the upper, outer parts of the breasts.
- Breast lumps, thickening, or a ropelike texture are often present. These lumps usually blend into the surrounding breast tissue and decrease in size with the onset of your menses.

WHAT ARE OTHER CAUSES OF BREAST PAIN?

Other causes of breast pain are noncyclical, meaning that symptoms do not follow a menstrual pattern. Noncyclical pain is typically located in only one breast or one area of the breast.

Symptoms can be constant or intermittent. Examples include:

- Large breasts (symptoms are typically bilateral and may include headaches and pain in the neck/shoulders).
- Infection in the breast.
- Pregnancy.
- Breastfeeding.
- Injury to the breast.
- Breast cancer (not a typical cause of breast pain).
- Medications that contain estrogen.
- Problems outside of the breast (eg. muscle strain, skin conditions, back problems, heartburn, chest pain, etc.).

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Anytime you notice a change in sensation or consistency of your breasts, it is important to make an appointment with your medical provider for a breast exam. Although most breast lumps in women ages 20 to 50 are not cancerous, all new breast lumps should be evaluated to determine if further testing is needed.

- If minor changes are found without a dominant breast mass, you may be asked to return after your next menstrual period for a repeat breast exam. Lumps from fibrocystic changes typically resolve after your menstrual cycle.
- Dominant breast masses, skin changes, nipple discharge, and/or enlarged lymph nodes are usually clues to other causes of breast pain and/or lumps. If abnormal findings are present, you will be referred for a breast ultrasound, mammogram, and/or a breast specialist for further evaluation.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

If breast symptoms are cyclical and there are no abnormal exam findings, you can be reassured that cancer is unlikely. Treatment, if desired, is aimed at symptom relief and includes the following:

❖ LIFESTYLE CHANGES

- Wear a well-fitting, supportive bra. Underwire bras tend to reduce pain in women with pendulous breasts.
- Wear a sports bra during exercise and while sleeping.
- Avoid nicotine, which can increase breast pain.

❖ DIETARY CHANGES

The role of dietary changes in relieving cyclical breast pain is unclear, but these interventions are generally harmless and may be helpful in some patients:

- Limit or avoid caffeine.
- Reduce your salt intake. This may decrease fluid retention (and therefore pain) in the breasts.
- Eat a low-fat, high complex carbohydrate diet. Complex carbohydrates include whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes.

❖ OVER-THE-COUNTER PAIN MANAGEMENT

- Pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil) can be helpful. Take ibuprofen with food to avoid an upset stomach.
- Pain-relieving creams or gels can also be effective. Research shows significant improvement in patients treated with diclofenac (Voltaren) gel, which is now available without a prescription. Diclofenac is an anti-inflammatory medication in the same class as ibuprofen.
- Warm compresses, heating pads or hot water bottles can also decrease pain.
- Some women prefer cool compresses or ice packs.
- There is inconclusive evidence to support the use of Vitamin E or evening primrose oil to reduce cyclical breast pain. However, some women find relief with these treatments. In one study, Vitamin E 200 IU taken twice daily for 2 months was helpful; however, no additional benefit was found after 4 months.

❖ PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS

- It is unclear whether birth control pills cause or relieve cyclical breast pain. Depending on their composition, they appear to have different effects on different women.
 - Birth control pills can lower the level of hormones linked to fibrocystic breast changes and improve cyclical breast pain in some patients.
 - In other cases, birth control pills may increase breast pain, such as in patients first starting the pill. If symptoms seem to be linked to estrogen-containing medication, your medical provider may recommend decreasing the dose or stopping the medication.
- For severe symptoms, you may be referred to a specialist to consider more advanced treatment options.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES: www.mayoclinic.org, www.uptodate.com/patients