

## Understanding Breast Pain

- Breast pain (mastalgia) is common.
- Most women will have some breast pain at some point in their lives.
- More than half will seek medical help often because they are worried about breast cancer.
- However, pain is rarely a sign of breast cancer.
- Simple lifestyle changes can help.
- Over the counter medicines discussed in this leaflet may be of benefit.

### More Help

Breast Cancer Care's publication Breast Pain available from [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

If you want further advice contact the breast care nurses at Bedford hospital on:  
01234 792057.

Bridget Ashdown 01234 355122 ext. 2041  
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## Breast Care

### Breast Pain (Mastalgia)



**This leaflet provides information and advice about breast pain.**

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Breast pain or mastalgia is common. Most women will notice a degree of pain at some point in their lives and more than half will seek medical help; often because they are worried about breast cancer. However pain is rarely a presenting symptom of breast cancer so reassurance and assessment is usually all that is required.

Breast pain can be cyclical or non-cyclical:

**Cyclical Breast Pain**

In cyclical breast pain the discomfort is influenced by hormones produced in different phases of the menstrual cycle. The hormones may make the tissues oversensitive in the week or so before a period and the discomfort gets less or disappears after the period starts.

Cyclical breast pain can be diagnosed by completing a pain chart for a couple of months. Usually the pain occurs in both breasts but it can occur in one side only. Cyclical breast pain usually stops after the menopause but it can continue in women who take HRT. Taking the pill, pregnancy or having a hysterectomy may also affect cyclical breast pain.

Cyclical breast pain is sometimes linked with stress and antidepressants including herbal remedies

### Non-Cyclical Breast Pain

Non-cyclical breast pain is not influenced by the menstrual cycle. Often the pain is caused by problems outside the breast such as bones, joints, cartilage and muscles of the rib cage

Sometimes angina or referred pain from the gall bladder can cause pain which feels as if it's in the breast.

### Treatment

Many women find that some simple lifestyle changes may help with the pain:

- if you smoke, cut down or stop;
- try reducing intake of caffeine in tea, coffee, chocolate and red wine;
- eat a well balanced diet with plenty of vitamins and minerals;
- properly fitting and supporting bras may be a good investment.

### Medicines and Pain Killers

Studies have shown that some women with cyclical breast pain have low levels of gammaolenic acid. Evening Primrose Oil contains gammaolenic acid and can be bought in chemists or supermarkets.

Taking 240 mg of gammaolenic acid (typically three grams or six capsules of evening primrose oil) per day for three months may help breast pain. If there is an improvement continue taking the capsules for six months, then stop and see if the pain has settled. Estimates of the effectiveness of evening primrose oil vary between 50 and 70 per cent of women gaining benefit.

Anti-inflammatory drugs like Ibuprofen can be useful especially if applied directly to the skin as creams or gels.

These too can be bought in

pharmacies. Check dose and side-effects with your GP if you are unsure, especially if you are taking anti-inflammatory drugs for other complaints.

More aggressive treatment with

hormone changing drugs like Danazol should be reserved for extremely severe pain as side-effects are

unpleasant e.g. weight-gain, acne,

facial hair etc. Danazol is dangerous in pregnancy. Tamoxifen is a drug licensed for use in breast cancer only but it's been shown to be effective for extreme cyclical breast pain. However

side effects can be serious and include hot flushes, headaches, gynaecological problems, eye problems and more.