

WHAT IS MASTALGIA?

Mastalgia is the medical term for painful breasts.

Most women will experience breast pain or tenderness at some point in their lives. Breast pain on its own is usually not caused by a disease in the breast and is not dangerous or linked to cancer.



TYPES OF BREAST PAIN

- **BREAST PAIN ASSOCIATED WITH THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE (CYCLICAL MASTALGIA).** Many women's breasts feel tender and swell a few days before their menstrual period. This usually affects both breasts and gets better a week or so after their period ends. This pain is caused by an increased sensitivity of the breast to female hormones.
- **BREAST PAIN NOT ASSOCIATED WITH MENSTRUAL CYCLE (NON-CYCLICAL MASTALGIA)** Sometimes breast tenderness is not linked to the menstrual period or happens to women who have reached menopause. This pain might hurt only in one breast, or only a part of the breast, or be a tingling, burning, stabbing feeling in the breast.
- **BREAST INFECTION** Infections in the breast can cause pain. When breast pain is caused by infections, the breast is usually red, swollen, and tender where the infection is. Most breast infections happen when women are breastfeeding, but they can also happen later in life.
- **BREAST PAIN FROM PROBLEMS AROUND THE BREAST** Occasionally pain in the ribs, rib cartilage, or muscles around the chest can be confused with pain in the breast. In these cases, it is often possible to pinpoint the pain to a bone or muscle. This type of pain can be easily treated with anti-inflammatory pain tablets.

HOW IS BREAST PAIN EVALUATED AT THE HOSPITAL?

While breast pain is not linked to cancer, your nurse or doctor should check for any signs of breast cancer while you are there. Your doctor or nurse will ask questions about the pain and about your personal risk for breast cancer. They will ask you to undress and will examine your breasts, chest, and under your arms.

If you are over 40 or if you have breast cancer in the family, you may be sent for an x-ray of the breast (mammogram). Younger patients who are at low risk and have a normal examination will not need any tests.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS?

If the doctor's examination and tests results are normal, there is no need to take treatment for breast pain. Many women with painful breasts are worried about cancer. Once cancer has been excluded and they have been properly reassured, most women are able to cope with the breast tenderness.

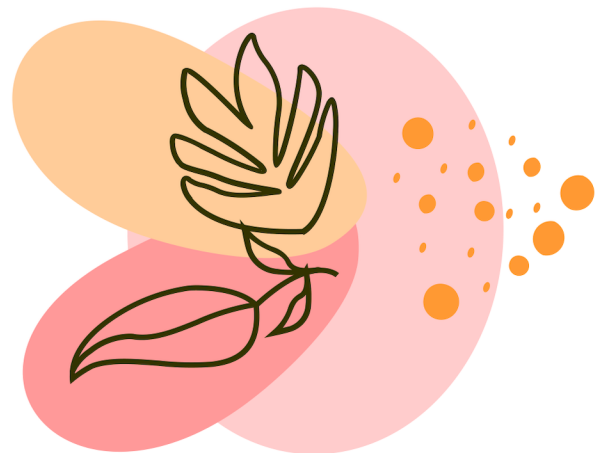
A few women have very severe breast pain and find it hard to continue with normal daily activities. This is a difficult problem as the pain is not caused by a disease and has no specific cure.

These are some things that may help:

- **Comfortable, supportive underwear** such as sports bras help many women cope with troublesome breast pain
- **Anti-inflammatory gels** (e.g. Voltaren gel) massaged regularly onto the breasts help in relieving pain. These gels are available at pharmacies over the counter.
- **Evening primrose oil tablets** used for at least two months relieve breast pain in some women. These tables are available at pharmacies over the counter.
- If the pain is caused by an **infection** it will be treated with **antibiotics**, and the nurse may drain any pus that may be present.
- If the pain is caused by a bony or muscular problem, **anti-inflammatory tablets** will be prescribed for a short time.

CONCLUSION

- Breast pain is a **common complaint**
- Breast pain without any other breast changes is not a sign of breast cancer
- Breast pain may be caused by **increased sensitivity** of breast tissue to female hormones
- When women have breast pain, it is a **good opportunity** to check for any symptoms or signs of breast cancer
- Most breast pain does not need treatment and improves with reassurance alone.



If you notice a worrying change in your breasts, you can make a Breast Clinic appointment by calling **021 404 5566**. If the wait for an appointment is over one month, you can ask your doctor or clinic nurse to write an urgent referral letter and we will see you at the **next Friday Breast Clinic at Groote Schuur Hospital**.