

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a benign breast condition?

A **benign** breast condition is one that is not cancer. These conditions often go away on their own or are easily treated. Because a few benign breast conditions can increase your risk of getting cancer in the future, you may need to have follow-up tests or exams with your **obstetrician–gynecologist (ob-gyn)**.

What are the different types of benign breast conditions?

Benign breast conditions include pain, lumps or masses, infections, nipple discharge, and skin changes.

What causes benign breast pain?

There are two types of breast pain: cyclic and noncyclic.

- Cyclic breast pain is related to changes in **hormone** levels, including the **menstrual cycle**, hormonal **birth control**, or **hormone therapy** for **menopause**. Symptoms may include sharp pain, burning, or itching. One breast may hurt more than the other. The symptoms are often worse right before the **menstrual period** starts and get better after bleeding begins.
- Noncyclic breast pain is not related to the menstrual cycle. It usually occurs in one breast in one specific area. You may feel pain all the time, or it may come and go. Many things can cause this type of pain, including injury, infection, medications, and

large breast size. In rare cases, noncyclic breast pain can be caused by breast cancer.

What should I do if I have benign breast pain?

For cyclic breast pain, these steps may help:

- Wear a well-fitted bra
- If you use combined hormonal birth control, using it continuously may improve symptoms. Talk with your ob-gyn if you want to learn more about this option.
- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever. If your pain is severe, your ob-gyn may prescribe medications for a short time.

If you have noncyclic breast pain, talk with your ob-gyn.

What are benign breast lumps or masses?

There are different types of benign breast lumps. In general, benign breast masses are divided into three types:

1. **Nonproliferative** —This type of mass has normal **cells**. It may be a **cyst** (a fluid-filled sac) or a simple **fibroadenoma** (a solid, well-defined lump). Most of these masses do not increase your risk of breast cancer and go away without treatment. If cysts are large or causing discomfort, the fluid can be drained.
2. **Proliferative without atypia** —In this type of breast mass, the cells are increasing in number but are otherwise normal. Having this type of mass slightly increases the risk of future breast cancer. These masses may be surgically removed, but sometimes they can just be watched to make sure they are not growing.
3. **Atypical hyperplasia of the breast** —In this type of mass, the cells are not normal and are increasing in number. Having this type of mass greatly increases the risk of future breast cancer. It is recommended that you have surgery to remove the cells and the area around them.

What is mastitis?

Mastitis is an infection of the breast tissue. It most often happens during breastfeeding, when a milk duct becomes clogged with milk and does not drain properly. Mastitis can cause flu-like symptoms, such as fever, aches, and fatigue. Your breast may be red, swollen, warm, and painful in one specific area.

How is mastitis treated?

You may be prescribed an **antibiotic** to treat the infection. It is safe to breastfeed your baby when you have mastitis and are taking an antibiotic. In fact, breastfeeding may help you heal faster. Applying warm compresses can help relieve the pain.

What are the signs and symptoms of nipple discharge?

Benign discharge tends to occur in both breasts and only when the breast or nipple is squeezed. It is usually milky white or greenish in color. Discharge that is bloody or clear is more concerning.

What causes nipple discharge?

During pregnancy, nipple discharge is normal as the breasts get ready to produce milk. If you are not pregnant, it may be caused by hormonal changes or some types of medication. Any nipple discharge should be checked by an ob-gyn.

What skin changes can affect the breasts?

Breast skin can be affected by common skin conditions, including psoriasis, eczema, and allergic reactions. Yeast infection of the skin folds under the breast is a common condition. If you have larger breasts, you are more likely to have skin yeast infections.

Some skin changes of the breast raise concern for cancer. These include redness, warmth, dimpling of the skin, and ulcers (small, red, painful blisters). Nipple changes such as crusting, scaling, or a nipple that has changed shape also raise concern. Tell your ob-gyn about any skin changes that you notice.

How are benign breast conditions diagnosed?

If you have breast symptoms, talk with your ob-gyn. Your ob-gyn should ask you questions about when your symptoms started, how severe they are, and whether you

have felt a mass or lump. You should also be asked about your risk factors for breast cancer.

You likely will have a breast exam. In some cases, you may need to have an imaging test of your breast. Breast imaging can be done with [mammography](#) , an [ultrasound exam](#) , or [magnetic resonance imaging \(MRI\)](#) . Imaging may be followed by a [biopsy](#) .

How are benign breast conditions treated?

Results of biopsy and imaging tests are used to decide on a course of treatment. Other factors, such as your age and breast cancer risk, may be considered too.

For some breast masses or areas that have abnormal cells, your health care professional may recommend removal. Sometimes this is done during a biopsy. In some cases, surgery is needed to remove the mass or cells.

What kind of follow-up will I need if I have a benign breast condition?

For some conditions, treatment may not be needed, only close follow-up. You may have more frequent clinical breast exams and imaging tests over the next 1 to 2 years.

Even if your imaging and biopsy results are normal, you may still need to have follow-up exams and tests to make sure that the mass or condition stays the same. You and your health care professional should discuss the recommended course of follow-up for your age, health risks, and test results.

What is breast self-awareness?

Breast self-awareness means being aware of how your breasts normally look and feel. Knowing what is normal for you can help you detect any changes that may signal a problem. Call your ob-gyn if you notice

- a new lump
- skin changes
 - thickening
 - dimpling
 - unexplained reddening

- nipple scaling or redness
- ulcers
- pain (especially if it is in one place or is getting worse)

Glossary

Antibiotic: A drug that treats certain types of infections.

Atypical Hyperplasia of the Breast: A condition in which cells in the breast ducts or lobes are increasing in number and do not look normal under a microscope.

Benign: Not cancer.

Biopsy: A minor surgical procedure to remove a small piece of tissue. This tissue is examined under a microscope in a laboratory.

Birth Control: Devices or medications used to prevent pregnancy.

Cells: The smallest units of a structure in the body. Cells are the building blocks for all parts of the body.

Cyst: A sac or pouch filled with fluid.

Fibroadenoma: A type of solid, noncancerous breast mass.

Hormone: A substance made in the body that controls the function of cells or organs.

Hormone Therapy: Treatment in which estrogen and often progestin are taken to help relieve symptoms that may happen around the time of menopause.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI): A test to view internal organs and structures by using a strong magnetic field and sound waves.

Mammography: X-rays of the breast that are used to find breast cancer or other breast problems.

Mastitis: Infection of the breast tissue that can occur during breastfeeding.

Menopause: The time when a woman's menstrual periods stop permanently. Menopause is confirmed after 1 year of no periods.

Menstrual Cycle: The monthly process of changes that occur to prepare a woman's body for possible pregnancy. A menstrual cycle is defined as the first day of menstrual bleeding of one cycle to the first day of menstrual bleeding of the next cycle.

Menstrual Period: The monthly shedding of blood and tissue from the uterus.

Nonproliferative: A term used to describe a noncancerous breast mass that contains normal cells.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Proliferative Without Atypia: A term that describes a noncancerous breast mass in which the cells are increasing in number but are otherwise normal.

Ultrasound Exam: A test in which sound waves are used to examine inner parts of the body. During pregnancy, ultrasound can be used to check the fetus.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

FAQ026

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