

BREAST PAIN (MASTALGIA)

What is mastalgia?

Mastalgia is breast pain and is either cyclic (which means that it tends to change with your menstrual cycle and is often worse just before your period) or non-cyclic. Pain can range from minor discomfort to severe in some cases. Many women worry more about what is causing the pain than the pain itself.

Cyclic breast pain

What causes it?

Cyclic breast pain is caused by a response to changing hormone levels. This leads to a sensation of heaviness, pain and an increase in tenderness. Cyclic breast pain becomes rare after menopause. Women who use hormone replacement therapy may still experience it.

How common is it?

Cyclic breast pain is very common.

Does it cause cancer?

Cyclic pain alone isn't usually a sign of breast cancer. You should see a doctor if the pain is troubling you or if you notice other changes, such as a breast lump or nipple discharge.

How is it treated?

Cyclic breast pain can be treated in a range of ways. In some cases hormone blockers are prescribed by a doctor.

The following suggestions have helped some women:

- a well-fitting, supportive bra
- cutting down on coffee, tea and caffeine. (Caffeine is in some over-the-counter medicines, such as cough medicine. Herbal tea and decaf coffee are OK. Reducing coffee should be done gradually as stopping suddenly can cause headaches.)

You should discuss these treatments with a doctor.

Non-cyclic breast pain

What causes it?

Non-cyclic breast pain, without a lump, can be due to breast cancer, but this is rare. More frequently it is due to a problem in areas near the breast, such as ribs or muscles in the chest wall, or occasionally organs in the chest (for example, heart or lungs). This can be caused by an injury or physical activity. Non-cyclic breast pain may be due to infection in the breast or, rarely, some inflammatory conditions. If you experience a new or unusual pain, see a doctor.

How common is it?

Non-cyclic breast pain is less common than cyclic breast pain. Generally the pain is there all the time and does not vary with the menstrual cycle.

How is it treated?

Treatment of non-cyclic breast pain depends on the cause. You should see a doctor to get this checked even if your mammogram is normal.

What about screening with mammography?

Even if you have breast pain, you should still have your routine two-yearly screening mammogram if eligible. If mammography is painful for you, try to reschedule your appointment for the week following your period. Some women find it helpful to take an over-the-counter painkiller 30 minutes before the mammogram appointment.

BreastScreen Aotearoa will not check you for breast pain or other breast symptoms. So, you should see a doctor if you have pain in one of your breasts that is new or unusual for you.

For more information

If you have questions not answered by this sheet, ask the breastcare nurse you saw at BreastScreen Aotearoa.