

3 possible causes of lumpy, painful breasts – none of which are cancer!

In 2016 it seems that more women than ever are aware of the risk of breast cancer – one in eight of us will develop the disease in our lifetime. We know that we need to check our breasts regularly and a lot of us know, or at least think we know, exactly what to look out for. But in an age where anyone can claim to be an expert - and can share their 'wisdom' worldwide in less than 140 characters - it is important to make sure that reliable information from expert sources cuts through the noise.

There's no shortage of articles telling us that lumpy, painful breasts can be a sign of cancer, but how many explain that actually, sometimes, this is completely normal?

Here are three possible causes for lumpy, painful breasts – NONE of which are cancer.

1. Firstly, some women's breasts secrete milk throughout their lives - even if they're not pregnant or breast feeding. This can make the breast tender and often lumps can form before the menstrual period. This is the breast's normal response to oestrogen, which prepares the body for a possible pregnancy, and the pain and lump are a result of inflammation caused by the small amount of secretions leaking through the milk gland wall. This is completely natural and harmless. It is most common in women who are not ovulating regularly, whose levels of oestrogen - which normally fall after ovulation - remain high.

Stress can make this secretion worse as your body releases more prolactin, a hormone that enables women to produce milk. This stress-hormone was designed to help women keep feeding their babies when they were starving – a powerful survival instinct. The pain and lumps caused by this 'over-secretion' are often predominantly one sided; one breast is often larger or more active than the other. Mothers who have breast fed will often recall that their babies preferred one breast, which produced more milk, or that one became engorged during breast feeding.

Occasionally, you may see small amounts of clear fluid leaking from one nipple but this is rarely a sign of a problem in that breast. However, if this persists or if the fluid is blood stained, you should get it checked out by your GP.

2. Breast pain felt before your period can often shoot into your armpit. This is because the breast is a highly specialized secretory gland which develops in the sweat glands of the armpit but migrates to the front of the chest before birth so that women can feed their babies in the future. Period-related breast pain that radiates up the nerves to the armpit can cause concern for women because they know how important it is to check the armpit for cancerous lumps that may have spread from the breast. In some cases, the pain felt in the armpit causes so much worry that the stress triggers the release of prolactin, making the pain even worse!
3. Simple breast cysts are caused by the same hormonal process - they occur most often in those over 35 years, as their breasts change with age and become less able to allow the fluid secretions to drain out of the breast via the lymphatic channels to the armpit.

Commented [CH1]: Can we add something here about how these are treated?

There you have it; breast + lump doesn't always = cancer. One of the best things women can do, from an early age, is get to know their bodies. Find out what's normal for you and if you notice any unusual changes or have any concerns make sure you 'get it off your chest' and speak to your GP.