

Why are my breasts painful and lumpy?
The pain goes into my arm pit?
It's only one breast
I am past the menopause?
My mother had breast cancer- I am worried!

The female breast is a highly specialised secretory organ composed of many small units or lobules where milk is produced under the control of two hormones, Oestrogen and Pro-lactin.

Women are surprised when as part of the consultation about their breast problem that while they are still having periods, or taking hormone replacement treatment their breasts are still making milk. Why they ask? Well its because throughout the menstrual cycle their ovaries make the hormone preparing them for pregnancy, part of which is making milk. This milk cannot escape from the nipple, and therefore causes pain and lumpiness. Stress makes this worse through the hormone pro-lactin, which was designed to keep women breast-feeding when they had run out of food. This hormone makes the breast more sensitive to oestrogen, and makes the pain and lumpiness worse.

What makes this normal activity more frightening for women is that one breast is always more active than the other, and hence the pain is often worse in one breast. Finally, because the breast started off life under the arm-pit before sliding down the chest wall before birth, any pain in the breast will often shoot from the nipple to under the arm, a place that women are aware may be the site of spread of breast cancer. What may have started as a harmless irregular period, with a slight excess of oestrogen, or stress due to changing jobs, moving house or a bereavement may escalate to an anxious woman frightened by the pain, with added stress making the situation worse.

Sometimes the production of milk may result in one of the milk ducts blowing up into a cyst, which is a simple harmless collection of breast "milk"

The symptom of pain alone is rarely a sign of breast cancer. However, it may not be enough to simply reassure the woman that she does not have cancer without helping the woman understand the underlying cause, as this may result in anxiety and more pain. Drugs which block oestrogen such as Tamoxifen, or block Prolactin, such as Bromocryptine can help the symptoms of breast pain.

However, the side effects are not insignificant and may not be justified. Dietary fat supplements such as Gammolinic Acid (GLA) have been widely recommended in the past, but randomized trials showed placebo was as effective as GLA. The strong placebo effect may have been reducing Prolactin secretion. This is why an adequate explanation as well as reassurance we believe is vital in treating the “patient” with the symptom of breast pain. It can even happen after the menopause when the ovaries stop making oestrogen, and the cyclical pain stops. This is due in part to the increasing levels of oestrogen in our diet. In this situation, changing to organic dairy may help, as there are less oestrogenic-like hormones in organic dairy. Also, after the menopause, oestrogen is still made in our fatty tissues, and losing weight will also help. Finally, many women believe Soya milk helps – however it is oestrogenic, and this is worth considering. I hope you found this helpful. If you wish to make any comments about this information leaflet please e-mail me at Simon.Cawthorn@gmail.com.