

Breast lumps

What are the types of breast lumps?

Breast lumps are very common in women and if found cause considerable anxiety. However, most are benign, that is, not cancerous. Some women have naturally lumpy breasts due to the nature of their breast tissue and this is usually no reason for concern. In many instances the lumps turn out to be areas of thickening of normal breast tissue. According to figures from breast clinics the three most common causes of breast lumps are:

- mammary dysplasia (fibrocystic disease): 32%
- fibroadenoma: 23%
- cancer: 22%.

There are a whole variety of other lumps which include simple cysts, fat necrosis, milk (lactation) cysts, papilloma of the duct and mammary duct ectasia. Tests to make a diagnosis and exclude cancer include a fine needle aspiration biopsy, ultrasound and mammography.

Checking your breasts

Most women find that their breasts become more lumpy and tender before their periods. Breasts can also change size and shape with obesity, increasing age and pregnancy. It is important to know your breasts well, how they look and feel and report any changes promptly to your doctor.

Mammary dysplasia

This common condition is also known as fibrocystic disease of the breast, fibroadenosis and cystic hyperplasia. It is hormone related and occurs between the menarche (onset of menstruation) and the menopause.

Features

- Most common from 30 to 50 years
- Pain, tenderness and swelling
- Increased symptoms pre-menstrual
- Usually settles after the period
- Fluctuation in the size of the mass
- Nodular feel with possible obvious lump
- Affects one or both breasts
- Most cysts appear 5 years before the menopause

Management

- Mammography if diffuse lumpiness over 40 years of age
- Needle biopsy if obvious lump
- Needle aspiration of obvious cysts
- Medication including analgesics for painful breast
- Surgery to remove undiagnosed lumps

Breast cysts

Cysts may occur in isolation or as part of mammary dysplasia (fibrocystic disease) and are common around the menopause time.

Features

- Fluid-filled sacs
- Common in women aged 40 to 50 years
- Rare under 30 years of age
- Tend to subside after the menopause
- May be tender or quite painful

Management

- Ultrasound is the investigation of choice
- Mammography can be considered
- Needle biopsy
- Needle aspiration of the cyst which may then disappear

Fibroadenoma

A fibroadenoma is a smooth, discrete breast lump consisting of fibrous and adenomatous (glandular) tissue. It is so firm and mobile that it appears to shift position and is commonly referred to as a 'breast mouse'. The cause is unknown.

Features

- Young women: usually in their 20s; common from 15 to 35 years of age
- Firm, smooth and mobile
- Usually asymptomatic: not painful
- Usually round
- Usually in upper outer breast area
- Double in size about every 12 months
- Rarely changes to cancer

Management

- Ultrasound and fine needle aspiration
- Mammography in older women
- Surgery is optional and may be left in late teens but as a rule if the tests are normal it can be safely left. If it enlarges or the woman wants to get rid of it, it is removed by a simple operation in day surgery.

