

BREAST CYSTS

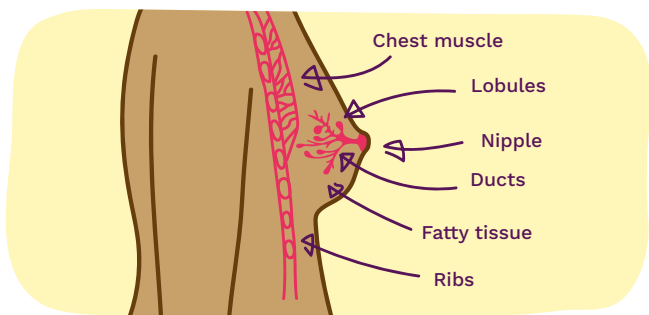
Benign breast conditions
information provided by
Breast Cancer Now

What are breast cysts?

Breast cysts are a benign (not cancer) condition. They're 1 of the most common causes of a breast lump, and can develop in either 1 or both breasts. It's common to have more than 1 cyst.

Breasts are made up of milk-producing glands (lobules) and tubes that carry milk to the nipple (ducts). These are surrounded by tissue that gives the breasts their size and shape.

Sometimes, the milk glands can fill up with fluid, causing breast cysts.



A breast cyst occurs when a lobule fills with fluid

It's thought cysts develop naturally as the breast alters with age, due to normal changes in hormone levels.

Some cysts are too small to feel, while others are large enough to make you uncomfortable. Clusters of cysts can form in 1 or both breasts.

After the menopause, as levels of the hormone oestrogen fall, cysts usually stop forming. If you use hormone replacement therapy (HRT), you may still develop cysts.

Who they affect

Anyone can develop a breast cyst, although they're uncommon in men.

You can develop a cyst at any age. They're most common in women over 35.

Breast cysts are not common after the menopause.

You're more likely to get breast cysts if you are:

- Between 35 and 50 years old
- Premenopausal (still have periods)
- Postmenopausal (no longer have periods) but taking HRT

What cysts feel like

Breast cysts can feel like a soft or hard lump depending on the amount of fluid in them.

They can be any size, ranging from a few millimetres to several centimetres.

Small cysts (microcysts) are common in young premenopausal women.

They're typically oval or round and can develop quickly anywhere in the breast.

If you have a cyst, it might feel uncomfortable or even painful. Before a period, cysts may become larger and feel sore or tender as hormone levels change. They may then settle when the period has finished. However, many people who have cysts don't feel them at all.

How cysts are diagnosed

You might notice a cyst as a lump in your breast. They can also be found by chance during a routine screening mammogram (breast x-ray) or while having investigations at a breast clinic for another reason.

If you see your GP because you have found a breast lump, they may be able to say whether it feels like a cyst. However, they're still likely to refer you to a breast clinic where you'll be seen by specialist doctors or nurses and have further tests.

At the breast clinic you'll have a breast examination. You may also have a mammogram or an ultrasound scan (using sound waves to produce an image of the breast), or both. An ultrasound scan can help show if a lump is solid or fluid-filled.

If you're under 40, you're more likely to have an ultrasound than a mammogram. This is because younger women's breast tissue can be dense, which can make the x-ray image less clear. Dense means there's a high amount of breast tissue compared to fat. It can make it harder to identify normal changes or benign conditions like cysts. However, some women under 40 may still need a mammogram to complete the assessment.

If the lump can be easily felt, your specialist may put a fine needle into it and draw off the fluid to confirm that it's a fluid-filled cyst.

You can read more about these tests in our booklet **Your breast clinic appointment** or call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000** for more information.

Treatment and follow-up

If you have a breast cyst, you will not usually need any treatment or follow-up. Most cysts go away by themselves and are nothing to worry about.

How long a cyst lasts varies from person to person. Cysts usually go away after the menopause, but some people have them throughout their life.

If the cyst is large or causing discomfort, your specialist may draw off (aspirate) the fluid using a fine needle and syringe. Sometimes this is done using ultrasound to help find the cyst.

The fluid drawn off from the cyst can vary in colour and range from clear to very dark. If the fluid is blood-stained, it will usually be sent to a laboratory to check the reason for this. It may also be sent for testing if there's evidence of an infection. Blood in the fluid is sometimes caused by the needle used to aspirate the fluid.

Once the fluid has been drawn off, the cyst usually disappears. You might feel some discomfort as the fluid is being drawn off, and the area may feel bruised and tender for a few days afterwards. Taking pain relief like paracetamol can help.

Breast cysts can come back or you may develop new cysts. The treatment for cysts is usually the same each time. It's important to see your GP if you think your cyst has returned or you have developed a new one.

Can cysts be prevented?

Cysts happen in response to normal hormone changes and there's no known way to prevent them. If you take HRT, this can increase your risk of developing new cysts.

Does having breast cysts increase my risk of breast cancer?

It's normal to feel anxious about having a breast cyst. Even though you may be relieved that it's a benign condition, you might still worry about breast cancer.

Having a breast cyst does not increase your risk of developing breast cancer in the future. However, it's still important to go back to your GP if you notice any changes in your breasts, no matter how soon after your cyst was found.

You can find out more about being breast aware in our booklet **Know your breasts: a guide to breast awareness and screening**.

If you're worried about breast cancer or have questions about breast health, you can call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000** or talk to us online at **breastcancer.org**

ABOUT THIS LEAFLET

Breast cysts was written by Breast Cancer Now's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast conditions.



For a full list of the sources we used to research it: Email health-info@breastcancer.org



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CHECKING YOUR BREASTS IS AS EASY AS TLC

TOUCH YOUR BREASTS

Can you feel anything new or unusual?

LOOK FOR CHANGES

Does anything look different to you?

CHECK ANY NEW OR UNUSUAL CHANGES WITH A GP

Breast cancer is most common in women over 50. While uncommon, it can also affect younger women.

Men can also get breast cancer, but this is very rare.

Get into the habit of regularly checking your breasts.

WE'RE HERE FOR YOU

We want everyone to have the confidence to check their breasts and report any new or unusual changes.

If you have any questions or worries about your breasts or breast cancer, call us free and confidentially.

0808 800 6000