

Breast cysts

About this leaflet

This leaflet tells you about breast cysts. It explains what cysts are, how they're found and what will happen if they need to be treated.

Although more common in women, men can also be affected by benign breast conditions.

What are breast cysts?

The breasts are made up of lobules (milk-producing glands) and ducts (tubes that carry milk to the nipple), which are surrounded by fatty tissue and supportive tissue. Sometimes, fluid-filled sacs develop in the breast tissue; these are breast cysts.

Breast cysts are common and harmless. It is thought that they develop naturally as the breast changes with age, in response to normal changes in hormone levels.

Although you can develop breast cysts at any age, they are most common in women over 35 who haven't yet reached the menopause. They occur more frequently as women get closer to the menopause and usually stop, or are not as frequent, after it. However, women who are taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after the menopause may also develop cysts.

Cysts can feel soft if they're near the surface of the skin, or like a hard lump if they're deeper in the breast tissue. They can develop anywhere in the breast but are more commonly found in the upper half. For some women cysts can feel uncomfortable and even painful. Before a period cysts may become larger and feel sore and tender. Sometimes women can have a cyst and not be able to feel it at all.

It's quite common to develop one or more cysts – either in one breast or both breasts – and this is nothing to worry about.

How are they found?

Cysts usually become noticeable as a lump in the breast or they are found by chance during a routine screening mammogram (breast x-ray).

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

At the breast clinic you will have a breast examination. You may also have a mammogram (breast x-ray) or ultrasound scan (which creates a picture of the breast using high-frequency sound waves).

If you are under 35 you're more likely to have an ultrasound scan than a mammogram. This is because younger women's breast tissue is too dense to give a clear image on a mammogram. If you are over 35 you will most likely have a mammogram, but you may also have an ultrasound scan if the lump is difficult to find.

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

Call our free helpline if you'd like more information about any tests you may be having, or see our **Referral to a breast clinic** leaflet.

Treatment and follow up

If you do have a breast cyst or cysts, you won't usually need any further treatment or follow up. Many cysts go away by themselves and are nothing to worry about.

If the cyst is large and causing discomfort, or doesn't go away on its own, your specialist will draw off the fluid using a fine needle and syringe. Once the fluid has been drawn off the cyst usually disappears. You may feel some discomfort as the fluid is being drawn off, and the area may feel bruised and tender for some days afterwards, so you may wish to take simple pain relief such as paracetamol.

The fluid drawn off from the cyst can vary in appearance from clear to very dark. It's usually only sent to a laboratory for testing if it's bloodstained, as there's a very small risk that this may be a sign of breast cancer.

Cysts can come back, or you may develop new cysts. If this happens you should go back to your GP to have it checked. The treatment for cysts is the same each time. If a cyst keeps refilling, you may be offered the choice of having a small operation to remove it completely. This operation is called a surgical excision. It can be done using either a local or a general anaesthetic and you'll be in hospital either for the day or overnight.

You will have a small wound with a stitch or stitches in it, and your doctors will tell you how to care for it afterwards. If your breast is painful after the operation you may want to take pain relief such as paracetamol. The operation will leave a small scar but this should fade in time.

What this means for you

You may feel anxious about having a breast cyst or cysts. Even though you may be relieved that it's a benign (non-cancerous) condition, you may still worry about breast cancer.

Having a breast cyst does not increase your risk of developing breast cancer. However, it's still important to be breast aware and go back to your GP if you think your cyst has come back or if you notice any other changes in your breasts.

You can find out more about being breast aware in our **Your breasts your health: throughout your life** booklet.

If you'd like any further information or support, call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay **18001**). You may also find it helpful to chat to someone who's had a similar experience to you by visiting our online benign breast conditions forum at **www.breastcancercare.org.uk**

Notes

This factsheet can be downloaded from our website, **www.breastcancercare.org.uk** It is also available in Braille on request by phoning **0845 092 0808**.

This leaflet has been produced by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists and reviewed by healthcare professionals and members of the public.

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Breast Cancer Care is here for anyone affected by breast cancer. We bring people together, provide information and support, and campaign for improved standards of care. We use our understanding of people's experience of breast cancer and our clinical expertise in everything we do.

Visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk
or call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000**
(Text Relay **18001**).

Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care.

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