



Fibrocystic changes describe the normal changes that occur in a woman's breast from puberty through menopause. Fibrocystic changes are caused by your breast tissue responding to changing levels of female hormones (estrogen and progesterone). The term "fibrocystic disease" was sometimes used in the past, but it is more accurate to call this common condition "fibrocystic changes."

Fibrocystic changes may include:

- **Lumpiness** – The combination of the different breast tissues changing in response to hormonal stimulation can create a lumpy feeling. This is normal. The breasts are made up of glandular tissue (milk ducts more prominent during pregnancy and breast feeding), fibrous tissue, fat tissue, underlying chest wall muscles, and ribs. Any of these areas of the breast may feel like a lump when you or your doctor examine your breasts.
- **Cysts** – Pockets of fluid may develop due to hormonal stimulation and constriction of a milk duct. Cysts may change in size from month to month and usually require no treatment. You may or may not be able to feel a cyst. If it becomes large enough to be uncomfortable, it can easily be drained.
- **Pain** – Fibrocystic changes often cause breast pain. It's important to know that breast cancer symptoms almost never include pain. Breast discomfort is often more apparent approximately two weeks before a menstrual period or in women who are taking hormones after menopause. It can also be caused by irritation of chest wall muscles, ribs, or cartilage which can be relieved by anti-inflammatory medications.
- **Nipple secretions** – Tiny droplets of fluid may appear on the nipple surface or on clothing from squeezing the nipple, sexual stimulation, a warm shower, or other stimulation to the breast. It is normal to have fluid in the milk ducts, even if you are not pregnant or nursing. Further tests should be done if the discharge comes out of the opening of one or both breasts without any stimulation or squeezing. Often this discharge is associated with tiny growths in the milk ducts called papillomas which are seldom cancerous. Green, gray, milky, opaque secretions from multiple nipple openings in one or both breasts may point to fibrocystic changes.

Self-care for fibrocystic changes

Pain

Remember that pain is almost never an early symptom of breast cancer.

1. Wear a supportive bra especially during strenuous exercise.
2. Minimize caffeine, i.e., coffee, tea, and soft drinks.
3. Cut back or eliminate salt one week before a menstrual period.
4. Try for 30-60 minutes of physical activity each day.
5. Eat a low-fat diet.
6. Take vitamin E (100 IUs daily) or vitamin B6 (100 mg daily) to relieve discomfort or pain caused by breast cysts.
7. Take evening primrose oil capsules (7-10 percent GLA content) – 1000-3000 mg per day or other omega-3s. Not recommended for patients with schizophrenia and/or those receiving drugs for epilepsy.
8. Use anti-inflammatory medications (ibuprofen 200-600 mg by mouth, 2-3 times a day for 1-2 weeks).
9. Apply moist heat to your chest 2-4 times a day.

Some or all of these suggestions may help. Try one at a time and if one helps your breast tenderness, there is no need to try the other suggestions.

Nipple secretions

Observe carefully. Don't squeeze the nipple trying to get secretions out. Check with your health care provider if you experience any of the following:

1. The secretions come out with no stimulation or squeezing and last for more than one month.
2. The secretions come from the nipple opening of one breast.
 - Secretion color may be clear, yellow, or bloody. Place a white tissue on the secretion to check the color.
 - If the secretions are milky, your doctor may order some hormone function testing.

Breast lumpiness

As women progress toward menopause, breast tissue often feels softer and overall less lumpy. However, with hormone replacement therapy, the lumpiness and tenderness may continue.

General recommendations

- Always perform monthly breast self-examination (BSE), commonly during the week after your period ends. Report any changes in your breasts to your health care provider.
- Get mammograms every 1-2 years, starting at age 40.
- Eat well, exercise regularly, manage stress, and enjoy life!

Other resources

- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

Web sites

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Visit your doctor's home page at kp.org/mydoctor
- WomenHeart: the National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease: womenheart.org
- American Heart Association: americanheart.org
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute: nhlbi.nih.gov

Books

- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- *Menopause: a Kaiser Permanente Guidebook for Women*.
- *The American Heart Association Cookbook – 25th Anniversary Edition*.
- *The 90-Day Fitness Walking Program*, Mark Fenron, Seth Bauer.
- *The No-Nag, No-Guilt, No Hassle Guide to Quitting Smoking*, Tom Ferguson, MD.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.