Menopause and Breast Pain

by AFRA WILLMORE

Dealing With Menopausal Breast Pain

It seems really unfair that throughout a woman's life she seems destined to suffer breast pain for one reason or another.

It starts as we enter puberty. Growing breasts can be sore and as menstruation begins many women experience breast soreness and tenderness as part of their pre-menstrual tension symptoms.

Heading into perimenopause (the early stages of menopause) you would hope that PMT/PMS would diminish but unfortunately it can be replaced by side effects of your fluctuating hormones – which might include breast pain! This pain may continue right through full menopause.

I say pain – women describe their discomfort in many ways including soreness, tenderness, heaviness or swelling. My experience was almost identical to my pre-menstrual symptoms; my breasts actually increased at least one cup size and I was paranoid about people even walking close to me as they were so tender.

Sorry if that's too much information, but many women worry about breast cancer, especially since the age of menopause often coincides with the age when the risk of cancer increases. The good news is that breast pain very, very rarely indicates cancer.

Of course if you are in any doubt about the cause of your breast pain you should consult a doctor, but for the vast majority of people the symptoms are caused by the hormonal upheaval of the menopause.

Around 70% of women report this side effect and many also say their breasts actually increase in size permanently as the hormone progesterone increases while estrogen decreases.

Relationship Impacts

It might sound trivial, but along with other menopause symptoms like hot flashes, restless nights and hormonal moods, breast tenderness can be a sore point (sorry!) for relationships.

Many women say that their breasts become so sensitive that they cannot bear their partner anywhere near them, which can lead to a loss of intimacy, feelings of resentment and relationship difficulties.

You have to feel sorry for breast-loving partners who are told "Hands off!" during PMS, pregnancy, breastfeeding and then menopause.

It's definitely worth working out what helps ease the pain not only for ourselves but for our long-suffering families who have to be careful to maintain a virtual no-man's land around us in case of accidental brushes or bashes of our ultra-sensitive boobs.

Sore Nipples

Many women experience menopause sore nipples in addition to breast pain. Hormone levels are in constant flux, which explains the sore nipples menopause can cause.

Often compared to the nipple pain women feel during breastfeeding, sore nipples can be excruciating and incredibly uncomfortable. And unfortunately, though it is common, there seems to be a lack of research into why women experience sore nipples during menopause and how to ease the pain.

Women who experience sore nipples in menopause also report that they remain hard and hot to the touch. And, while some women dealing with breast pain are still in perimenopause and experiencing periods, some have been period-free for long periods of time. So what could possibly be causing nipple pain — and what can be done about it?

Some women find relief in the form of topical anesthetics, which numb the area you apply them to and prevent nerves from transmitting pain signals to the brain. These are available both over-the-counter and by prescription, so speak to your doctor to find out if this type of treatment would work for you.

OB/GYN and menopause specialist Dr. Mary Jane Minkin suggests what she calls a "breast vitamin cocktail" for the relief of sore, erect nipples and breast pain: 100-200 mg of vitamin B6, 200-400 units of vitamin E, and two 500-unit capsules of evening primrose oil every day. She also recommends having your blood prolactin hormone levels checked; this hormone is made by the pituitary gland and can stimulate the breasts.

Next page: things you can do to ease breast pain.

Things You Can Do to Ease Breast Pain

Vitamins

I was intrigued to learn that diet can help with combatting breast pain – I wish I'd researched this properly years ago! Vitamin B-complex and vitamin E are apparently especially helpful.

Top foods containing significant levels of vitamin E include tofu (especially the light and silken types), spinach, almonds and hazelnuts, roasted sunflower seeds and avocado.

The great news is that vitamin E can also protect against heart disease, cancer and age-related eye damage. Not so great news is that too much of the vitamin consumed as a supplement can cause excessive bleeding.

Vitamin B-complex is a vast group of vitamins, which can be found in a variety of foods. Try to include beans, dairy products, peanuts, eggs, dark green and leafy vegetables, wheatgerm, oranges and meat and liver (if you are not vegetarian) in your diet to ensure a good vitamin B intake. And maybe take a B-complex supplement to be sure you are getting the full recommended daily amount (RDA).

While we are on the subject of supplements for menopause, some women swear by evening primrose oil but you should check with your doctor before starting to take it as it is not suitable for everyone. For instance, it may not be advisable for those suffering from epilepsy.

More Water, Less Salt

Some breast tenderness can be caused by hormone-related water retention. It sounds odd but try drinking plenty of water, which can flush the excess fluid out, and try including natural diuretics in your diet like parsley, cucumbers and celery.

It's also worth seeing if you can cut down your salt intake – your breasts might feel less sore and your heart will

thank you too!

Get the Right Bras

There are other practical measures you can take, too. I was advised in pregnancy to wear a night bra – a soft supportive crop top or wireless cotton bra – and this tip can also work with sore menopausal breasts. This simple fix could help end the misery of sleepless nights caused by tender breasts.

Make sure your daytime bras are a good fit too. Go in for a proper fitting, especially if you have bulges, the back rides up or the straps dig in. Your favourite bra that you've had for years might be comfortable, but it is highly unlikely to still be offering any real support! You might need two sets of underwear if you find your breast size varies throughout the month.

It is especially important to make sure you have a good supportive bra for exercising. It will minimize pain and help stop the dreaded droop! Natural fabrics are best, or specialist sports bras that are designed to "breathe."

Avoid Caffeine and Saturated Fats

Finally, it's worth taking an honest look at your coffee and saturated fat intake (butter, crisps and fried food) and smoking habits. Cut down caffeine and saturated fats and give up smoking – it's not just your breasts that will benefit.

If your breast pain and sore nipples are severe and none of our tips help, it would be wise to make an appointment with your healthcare provider just to rule out other conditions or to discuss the possibility of drug treatment.