

What are Fibrocystic Changes?

Fibrocystic change, formerly called fibrocystic breast disease, is a common, non-cancerous condition. Other terms that may be used to describe fibrocystic changes include “chronic cystic mastitis,” “cystic disease” and “mammary dysplasia.”

What are Fibrocystic Changes?

Symptoms associated with fibrocystic changes include:

- Lumpiness
- Tenderness
- Pain
- Breast cysts
- Increased density
- Fibrosis (formation of scar-like connective tissue)

What Causes Fibrocystic Changes?

The breasts are very complex glandular organs that consist of 15 to 20 lobes (fluid producing units) that radiate from the nipples. This whole glandular structure is constantly changing because of the stimulation of estrogen and progesterone hormones. When the hormonal levels begin to increase after the menstrual period, the breasts respond by beginning to produce fluid. Each breast will produce and store 15 to 30 ccs (3 to 6 teaspoons) of fluid in the ducts during the month. Hormones also cause extra layers of cells to be produced in the ducts. The combination of the extra fluid and extra cells causes an increase in the size of the breasts, areas that feel lumpy and possibly tenderness or pain. The degree of response to hormonal changes varies greatly among women and can range from mild discomfort to painful, lumpy breasts.

Who Has Fibrocystic Changes?

Fibrocystic changes are most common in women between 30 – 50 years of age. Menopause relieves symptoms because female hormones in the body decrease sharply unless hormone replacement therapy is prescribed. It is estimated that 50 percent of all women have irregular-feeling, lumpy breasts. Furthermore, studies have shown that as many as 90 percent of women have microscopic fibrocystic changes.

Do Fibrocystic Changes Cause Cancer?

Being diagnosed with fibrocystic changes does **not** put you at higher risk for breast cancer. However, it may make clinical breast exams and imaging techniques more difficult because of increased lumpiness, breast density and the presence of pain.

How are Fibrocystic Breast Changes Diagnosed?

Most often diagnosis begins when a woman complains to her healthcare provider about generalized lumpiness or pain that is greatest the week before the menstrual period. She also reports that menstruation greatly reduces her symptoms. These two complaints are common with fibrocystic changes. A healthcare provider will take a careful history looking for symptoms that fluctuate with the normal cycling of hormones and will perform a clinical breast exam. The exam may also include an ultrasound or screening mammogram to rule out any other causes. If the ultrasound or mammogram shows no evidence of disease, the most likely cause is fibrocystic changes. The diagnosis is made by the combination of symptoms and not finding any abnormality during the clinical exam and any screening tests.

What Can I Do About Fibrocystic Symptoms?

Interventions for fibrocystic changes vary according to the type of symptom. Often, when women understand that their symptoms are normal and do not indicate a disease, they can deal with monthly discomfort. However, some women's symptoms are so severe that they need intervention.

Fibrocystic Self-Care

- Wear a well-fitted bra to prevent movement of the breasts.
- Sleep in a sports bra to prevent movement of breasts during sleep, especially the week before the menstrual period.
- Ask your healthcare provider about taking Vitamin E, Vitamin B6, Niacin or evening primrose oil (found in health food stores).
- Reduce caffeine intake (coffee, colas, tea, chocolate). Studies of caffeine reduction have been mixed, but some women find it helpful.
- Reduce salt (sodium) intake the week before the menstrual period.

Your Healthcare Provider May Prescribe:

- Low dose birth control medication to decrease levels and fluctuation of hormones.
- Bromocriptine (Parlodel), a medicine to block the production of the hormone prolactin.
- Danazol (Danocrine) to block estrogen production.

UNDERSTANDING FIBROCYSTIC CHANGES



“IT’S TIME TO PLACE YOURSELF IN TRAINED
HANDS . . . YOUR OWN.”