

BREAST SCARES

(that aren't always scary)

Not all breast ailments are a matter of life and death

By Marcy Lovitch

THE PROBLEM

Breasts that are different sizes SHOULD I WORRY?

No. Many women have one breast that's slightly bigger than the other, says Susan Love, M.D., a UCLA adjunct professor of surgery and author of *Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book* (Perseus Publishing). "Having asymmetrical breasts is more of a cosmetic issue than a medical one," she adds.

What should I do?

Some women find lopsided breasts psychologically distressing, especially when the difference is more than a cup size. If your asymmetry makes you feel self-conscious, wearing a silicone bra insert can help, or you may consider having plastic surgery.

THE PROBLEM

Extreme nipple tenderness SHOULD I WORRY?

Increased breast sensitivity is most often due to hormonal fluctuations associated with your period, says Linda Frame, R.N., senior clinical adviser for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation in Dallas. "Once your period is over, your nipples should feel less sensitive and return to normal," she says. Other possible causes include breast-feeding, perimenopause, pregnancy, eczema of the nipple, an infection or wearing a new bra made of abrasive fabric.

What should I do?

If the discomfort is associated with other symptoms, such as a lump or skin changes, see a doctor as soon as possible. In the absence of other symptoms, wait a month to determine if the tenderness is connected with your menstrual cycle. If so, taking an over-the-counter pain reliever should help. If nipple sensitivity persists for longer than a month, see your doctor.



THE PROBLEM

Change in nipple appearance SHOULD I WORRY?

It depends. Nipples typically turn dark and become bigger and more erect during the first trimester of pregnancy. They may also darken from taking certain hormonal medications, such as birth-control pills. A rash, redness, scaliness around the nipple or itching that lasts several weeks could also be a sign of eczema or Paget's disease, a rare form of breast cancer.

What should I do?

If you've ruled out pregnancy, see your doctor. Eczema can be treated with topical medications. If your physician suspects Paget's disease, she'll want to take a biopsy.

THE PROBLEM

Nipple discharge SHOULD I WORRY?

If the discharge isn't bloody or sticky, there's probably no need for alarm. "It can be normal to experience a discharge when you're sexually aroused or when you squeeze or stimulate your breast," says Love. And since the production of prolactin, the hormone that stimulates lactation, continues, even after nursing ends, it's also normal to have a watery, slightly milky discharge a couple of years after breast-feeding.

What should I do?

See your doctor if the discharge is bloody or whitish and sticky, or if it comes from one breast, not both. This can signal a precancerous condition or an intraductal papilloma, a benign growth on the lining of the milk duct.

THE PROBLEM

Breast pain

SHOULD I WORRY?

Not necessarily. Many women equate pain with breast cancer, but only about 10 percent of breast-cancer patients actually report pain in the early stages of the disease, says Vivian Lewis, M.D., professor of OB-GYN at the University of Rochester Medical School. In most cases, breast pain is caused by normal hormonal fluctuations. Pain that's accompanied by redness or swelling and skin that's warm to the touch may indicate an infection. Other possible causes are costochondritis (a form of arthritis that occurs where the ribs and breastbone meet), gas, heartburn, an inflamed vein in the breast or a cyst pressing on a nerve.

What should I do?

If the pain is period-related, an over-the-counter pain reliever can help. Some studies have shown that taking 3,000 milligrams of evening primrose oil (found in health-food stores), 400 IU of vitamin E or no more than 100 milligrams per day of vitamin B₆ can also ease this pain. If it persists after your period ends, see your doctor.

Marcy Lovitch is a health writer whose work has appeared in *Fitness*, *American Baby* and *Marie Claire*. ▸