

Breast problems

Breast problems are very common in women of all ages. Most breast problems are not caused by breast cancer but it is really important to get any breast problems or concerns checked by a doctor. You may need to be referred to a breast specialist and you may need some tests such as a [mammogram](#) or an [ultrasound scan](#) to find out the cause.

What breast problems can occur?

There are many different breast problems, including:

- [Breast lumps.](#)
- [Breast pain and tenderness.](#)
- [Mastitis.](#)
- Nipple discharge.
- Inverted nipples.
- Changes in the skin of the breast.

What are the causes of nipple discharge?

Nipple discharge is usually caused by benign disease (ie not breast cancer). Normal nipple discharge occurs during pregnancy and breastfeeding and may continue until up to one year after childbirth or the end of breastfeeding. Excessive breast stimulation can also cause nipple discharge.

Nipple discharge can be caused by certain gland (endocrine) problems such as a [prolactinoma](#) or if you're taking certain medicines (the [combined oral contraceptive pill](#), [cimetidine](#), [antidepressants](#) or [metoclopramide](#)).

Nipple discharge caused by an underlying breast problem (for example, [breast cancer](#)) is more likely to affect only one breast, the discharge may be bloodstained and there may also be an abnormal [lump in the same breast](#).

What causes inverted nipples?

An inverted nipple points into the breast instead of the normal shape of pointing outwards. Inverted nipples are often harmless with no serious underlying cause. Many women are born with nipples that naturally invert at times and then point outwards at other times. Sometimes the nipple may become inverted after breastfeeding.

If one or both nipples start to invert then it is very important to get it checked out but most cases are not due to anything serious.

The possible causes of inverted nipples include:

- Injury to the breast, or breast surgery.
- [Breast cancer](#).
- Breast infections - for example, [mastitis](#).
- Rapid and substantial loss of weight.

What are the causes of changes in the skin of the breast?

Skin problems can develop on or near the breast. There may be itching, scaling, dimpling, swelling, redness or other changes in skin colour. There is often no serious underlying breast problem but these skin changes may be caused by [breast cancer](#) so it's really important to get checked out straightaway in case there is a serious problem.

Further reading

- [Perry MC](#); Breast Lump
- [Breast pain - cyclical](#); NICE CKS, August 2021 (UK access only)
- [Salzman B, Collins E, Hersh L](#); Common Breast Problems. Am Fam Physician. 2019 Apr 15;99(8):505-514.

- [Breastfeeding problems](#); NICE CKS, February 2022 (UK access only)

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Authored by: Dr Colin Tidy, MRCGP	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Rosalyn Adleman, MRCGP	
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