SYMPTOM

Breast lump

A breast lump is a new area of thickened or raised tissue in a breast or armpit

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A distinct firm, soft, smooth, or uneven area

WHERE IT IS FELT
In the breast, chest wall, or armpit

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Cysts, fibroadenomas, hormone-related breast changes

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Red, hot, painful breast with fever or feeling very unwell

USUALLY LASTS
Days to months, depending on hormonal changes or the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Any new lump or persistent breast or armpit change

Overview

A breast lump is an area that feels different from the tissue around it. It may be in the breast, under or around the nipple, on the chest wall, or in the armpit. Breast tissue can change with age, menstrual cycles, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause.

Most breast lumps are not cancer. Common causes include fluid-filled cysts and non-cancerous growths called fibroadenomas. However, the cause cannot usually be identified by touch alone. Arrange a medical appointment for any new breast lump, even if it is painless or you recently had a normal screening test.

People of any sex can develop a breast lump. A new lump in a man or transgender person also needs assessment.

What it may feel or look like

A lump may feel soft, rubbery, firm, or hard. It may move slightly under the skin or feel fixed in place. Some lumps are painful or tender, while others cause no discomfort.

You might notice:

Pain, movement, smooth edges, firmness, or lack of pain do not reliably show whether a lump is harmless.

- One distinct lump or several uneven areas
- Thickening that feels different from the other breast
- Swelling in part or all of the breast
- A lump or enlarged gland in the armpit
- Nipple discharge or a change in nipple position
- Dimpling, puckering, redness, or another skin change

Common causes

Hormone-related breast changes can make the breasts feel swollen, tender, or lumpy, especially before a menstrual period. These changes often affect both breasts.

Breast cysts are fluid-filled sacs. They may feel smooth, round, and tender, and their size can change over time.

Fibroadenomas are solid, non-cancerous growths made from breast gland and supporting tissue. They often feel smooth or rubbery and may move under the skin.

During breastfeeding, a firm area may result from inflammation or milk building up faster than it is removed. Mastitis can cause pain, warmth, redness, and flu-like symptoms. Infection or an abscess is also possible.

Less common causes include lipomas, scar tissue after surgery or injury, and fat necrosis, where damaged fatty tissue forms a firm area. A growth inside a milk duct may cause a lump or nipple discharge.

Breast cancer is a less common cause, but it must be considered whenever a new lump appears. It cannot be confirmed or excluded by touch alone.

When to seek medical care

Book an appointment if you find a new breast or armpit lump. Do not wait for it to hurt or for your next screening mammogram. If it seems linked to your menstrual cycle, note whether it changes, but seek advice if it remains after the cycle or concerns you.

Request prompt assessment if you also have:

Seek same-day medical care for a red, hot, swollen, and painful breast with fever, chills, or

feeling very unwell. These signs may indicate mastitis or an abscess that needs treatment.

Call emergency services if you become confused, faint, have severe breathing difficulty, or rapidly become seriously unwell.

- New skin dimpling, puckering, or nipple pulling inward
- Bloody or clear discharge that occurs without squeezing
- A change in breast shape or size
- A sore or crusted nipple that does not heal
- A growing lump or persistent armpit swelling

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when you noticed the lump, whether it changes with your menstrual cycle, and whether you have pain, discharge, fever, recent injury, pregnancy, or breastfeeding. They may also ask about medicines, previous breast conditions, and family history.

They will examine both breasts, the nipples, and the lymph nodes in your armpits and around your collarbones.

Depending on your age, symptoms, pregnancy status, and examination, testing may include:

Needing these tests does not mean you have cancer. They help identify the cause accurately.

- Ultrasound , which shows whether an area is solid or fluid-filled
- Mammography , a low-dose breast X-ray
- Biopsy , which removes a small tissue sample for laboratory testing
- Cyst aspiration , which uses a fine needle to remove fluid

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Some simple cysts and fibroadenomas need only monitoring. A painful cyst may be drained. An infection may need antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline , while an abscess may need drainage. A growing or troublesome non-cancerous lump can sometimes be removed. If cancer is found, a specialist team will discuss treatment options.

While waiting for assessment, you can:

If you are breastfeeding, continue feeding or expressing at your baby's usual pace if you can. Avoid trying to forcefully "empty" the breast. Seek help promptly if redness, fever, or worsening pain develops.

- Wear a comfortable, supportive bra if the area is tender
- Try a cool or warm compress
- Use a non-prescription pain reliever if it is safe for you, following its label
- Avoid repeatedly pressing, squeezing, or aggressively massaging the lump
- Record changes in size, pain, skin appearance, or nipple discharge

What to expect

Many breast lumps are benign, meaning not cancerous. Some settle after a menstrual period or treatment for inflammation. Others remain but do not need removal.

You may receive reassurance after examination and imaging, or need a biopsy before the cause is clear. Attend recommended follow-up even if the lump becomes smaller. Return sooner if it grows or you develop new breast, nipple, skin, or armpit changes.

Common questions

Can I tell whether a lump is cancer by touching it?

No. Hardness, pain, shape, or movement may help guide assessment, but none can confirm the cause. An examination and sometimes imaging or biopsy are needed.

Should I wait until after my period?

Hormonal lumps may improve after a period. However, you can book an appointment when you first notice a new lump. Seek follow-up if it remains, grows, or comes with nipple or skin changes.

Can a normal mammogram miss a new lump?

A previous normal mammogram does not explain a newly discovered lump. Contact a healthcare professional rather than waiting for your next routine screening.

Are breast lumps common during breastfeeding?

Firm or tender areas can occur during breastfeeding, often with inflammation. Same-day assessment is important if the breast becomes red and hot or you develop fever or feel unwell.

Sources

- NHS. Breast lumps
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Suspected cancer: recognition and referral, NICE guideline NG12
- American College of Radiology. ACR Appropriateness Criteria: Palpable Breast Masses
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Benign Breast Problems and Conditions
- Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine. Clinical Protocol #36: The Mastitis Spectrum, Revised 2022