



Fibrocystic Breast Changes

Fibrocystic breast changes are the formation of cysts, which may be accompanied by pain and tenderness, usually before the menstrual period. Up to 50% of women have some cystic breast changes. What follows are responses to some of the most frequently asked questions about fibrocystic breast changes.

What causes fibrocystic breast change?

Fibrocystic changes are related to the monthly rise and fall of female hormones produced by the ovaries during a woman's reproductive years. Changes in hormones during the menstrual cycle cause breast tissue and blood vessels to swell, milk glands and ducts to enlarge, and breasts to retain water. At this time, breasts may feel swollen, tender, lumpy, and women may experience pain. After a woman has her period, these symptoms usually subside.

How can I do a breast self-exam when I have fibrocystic changes and I don't even know what I'm feeling all the time?

There's more than one way to examine your breasts. There are also various groups, which provide instruction to women (e.g. American Cancer Society, MammocareO). Find an instructor/group and a method with which you are comfortable. Ask questions and spend ample time using breast models. Also, examine your breasts every month. The more you practice breast self-exams, the more comfortable you'll become with how your breasts feel and what is "normal" for you.

What type of doctor should I see if I have benign breast changes?

There are many types of doctors who can help you (general practitioners, internists, gynecologists, and surgeons). Most importantly, find a doctor with whom you are comfortable and who has knowledge of and interest in benign breast changes.

I have a change in my breast and my doctor wants to watch it over a period of time to see what happens. Is it okay to "wait and see" what happens?

It may be okay, but ask yourself a few questions. First, how long does the doctor want to wait? Watching a change over a short time interval may not be a problem, but the breast change should be monitored periodically until it is determined that the change is benign (not cancerous). Second, are you comfortable with waiting? If you're not, you need to speak with your doctor about speeding up the waiting process. If you still don't get satisfaction, it may be time to shop around for a new doctor.