

Mastitis – Catching it early

You have woken up and out of the blue it seems, you have a sore, red lumpy patch on one breast. You have heard so many horror stories about mastitis that you are terrified as you wonder, do I have mastitis?

Your sore breast may be due to a blocked duct that, if treated quickly, could prevent a bout of mastitis, an inflammation of the breast that may or may not also be infected.

Blocked ducts

A blocked duct is just as the name sounds, an area of the breast that hasn't been properly drained. When this happens, fat globules can clump together causing milk to bank up behind the blockage, creating an inflammation of the breast tissue.

Mastitis

As well as having a sore breast – either the entire breast is red, hot and painful or you may have a localised tender area - symptoms of mastitis may include a headache, general body aches and tiredness as though you are getting the flu. Mastitis can hit suddenly and hard: one minute you feel just fine and the next you feel shattered and aching all over with chills and a fever. Sometimes flu-like symptoms come on even before you get a fever or notice breast tenderness. Mastitis can affect you emotionally too - it is common to feel 'just awful' and teary.

Preventing mastitis

Taking care of yourself is one of the best preventative measures against mastitis: overdoing things, becoming exhausted and stressed are often contributing factors. Rest, a nutritious diet and relaxing activities that make you feel good will reduce the effects of stress and boost your immune system.

Blocked ducts (which can lead to mastitis if not treated quickly) can be due to pressure from clothing such as poorly fitted bras or sleeping in positions that compress your breast, such as lying on your stomach. Missing feeds and overly full breasts can also result in blocked ducts so take breaks on long car trips to feed (full breasts and seat belt pressure are a lethal mix!) and express for comfort if you go out without your baby or if you feel full after feeds. If baby sleeps through a feed either express or gently wake him to feed. If you feel any lumpiness, massage your breast gently towards the nipple under a warm shower (or apply a warm face washer) and express for comfort.

If you have a blocked ducts your milk may taste salty so your baby may not feed well on that side. A tip from lactation consultant Sue Cox is to eat freshly crushed garlic. Babies like the taste of garlic which will mask the salty taste,

and your baby will drain your breast. Also, as garlic is a natural antibacterial agent it could help reduce infection.

Cracked nipples can also set you up for mastitis as infection can enter the breasts through broken skin so it is important to seek help early for nipple soreness.

Treating mastitis

Whether you have blocked ducts or mastitis, “**warmth, rest and empty your breast**” is a good motto to remember and if you suspect mastitis, remember this is a medical illness. Ideally, delegate all duties except feeding your baby and consult your doctor early.

- Take pain relief such as Panadol or Nurofen half an hour before feeding and apply heat to your sore breast.
- Feed baby frequently to drain your breast. Feed on the sore side first and vary feeding positions to empty all ducts.
- Alternate hot and cold packs on your breast for comfort – heat before a feed will stimulate circulation and mobilise infection fighters in the breast. It will also increase oxytocin, which will help milk flow, clearing blocked ducts as you feed. Applying cool packs after feeds will relieve pain.
- Drink plenty of fluids – fever and infection will increase your need for fluids.
- Weaning isn't wise while you are treating mastitis as this will increase the chances of developing an abscess that needs to be surgically drained
- If you are prescribed antibiotics, be sure to take the full course or you could experience a recurrence.

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