

FIBROCYSTIC BREAST CHANGES

Following your visit to the Franciscus Breast Clinic, your nurse specialist/physician assistant diagnosed you with fibrocystic breast changes.

What are fibrocystic breast changes?

Fibrocystic breast changes or 'mastopathy' is a collective name for benign conditions in the glandular tissue in your breasts.

The word

'mastopathy' consists of the Greek word 'mastos', meaning breast, and 'path', meaning illness or condition.

Women of child-bearing age experience constantly changing female hormone levels during their menstruation cycle. The glandular tissue in your breasts may respond to these hormone fluctuations by swelling, which often leads to pain. In the second half of your menstruation cycle in particular, significant painful swelling may occur in your breasts. This harmless but highly bothersome condition is referred to as *fibrocystic breast changes*. Sometimes, fluid-filled pockets (cysts) of a few millimetres or even centimetres across may form in your breasts. This condition is referred to as *cystic mastopathy*. You can feel these cysts as an often smooth, round swelling. Cysts may 'pop' and disappear, they may be drained or they may simply be left untreated. Some women are significantly more predisposed to fibrocystic breast changes or cystic mastopathy than others.

In addition, it is important to know that fibrocystic breast changes do not mean you are at increased risk of developing breast cancer.

Different forms

There are two forms of fibrocystic breast changes:

- Cyclic fibrocystic breast changes;
- Non-cyclic fibrocystic breast changes.

Cyclical fibrocystic breast changes

These types of changes are related to your menstruation cycle. Around three to seven days before your period (while the

menstruation process gets going), many women often experience heavy or tight breasts, occasionally with a stabbing pain. The female sex hormones cause the glands in your breasts to swell a little around this time.

In general, women aren't able to pinpoint the exact location of the pain, but many women do feel lumps in their breasts.

Non-cyclic fibrocystic breast changes

This form of fibrocystic breast changes is less common and doesn't generally present in any kind of fixed pattern. The location of the pain can clearly be pinpointed, and the pain is often described as burning, sharp or niggling. This form is more common in women over 40. The symptoms often subside during the menopause.

Pain (mastalgia)

Breast pain (*mastalgia*) without any changes during the menstrual cycle may also occur. This pain may be caused by pain in the ribs and muscles in your chest, and occasionally, by the glandular tissue in your breasts itself.

What do I need to look out for?

If you notice any changes in your breasts, it is very important that you ask your GP for an opinion (or your specialist if you are already attending breast checkups at the hospital). Changes could always be a sign of breast cancer. Without further investigation, it is impossible to know for sure whether any lumps are harmless and benign or malignant.

Treatment

Despite the fact that many women suffer from fibrocystic breast changes, we do not have a clear idea yet of what causes them. That said, there are several different ways to reduce your hypersensitivity.

Non-hormonal

- The first step to take is to wear a properly fitting non-wired (sports) bra with wide shoulder straps, and to make sure you stay warm by wearing a vest or jumper. This is because the

colder your breasts are, the more painful they may feel. If necessary, you can also wear a bra at night.

- If a properly supportive bra does not offer sufficient relief, you can combine it with painkillers. In general, we recommend that you take 1,000 mg of paracetamol up to four times daily. If that does not offer sufficient relief, you should ask the specialist whether you can combine paracetamol with other (stronger) painkillers.
- Bothersome *cysts* (mainly due to pain) can be drained by a doctor. This can be done as part of an ultrasound scan. The radiologist will use the ultrasound scan to establish whether the (painful) swelling is caused by a cyst, and will then use a thin needle to pierce and drain the swelling as part of a visual procedure. Generally speaking, this is not a particularly stressful treatment — instead, you're more likely to feel relieved that it's been done.
- Some women benefit from reducing their intake of *coffee, tea, chocolate, Coca Cola, wine* and *cheese*. These foods and drinks contain methylxanthines and tyramine; substances that can have a significant impact on the biochemical reactions in our bodies. It will take around three months after quitting these products before you to notice any effect.
- One capsule of primrose oil a day has been shown to provide relief in some cases. Primrose oil is available at chemists, pharmacies and health food stores. However, it will not be reimbursed by your health insurer. Once again, it may take around three months before you feel any effect. Generally speaking, primrose oil capsules are extremely safe; the only cases in which they are not recommended is if you suffer from bipolar disorder or epilepsy.

Hormonal

- Taking the contraceptive pill helps in some women.
- In severe cases of cyclic fibrocystic breast changes, hormonal treatment may be considered. One major disadvantage of this treatment is that it always involves a large number of side effects. As fibrocystic breast changes are harmless in themselves (even though they can be highly bothersome), hormone treatment is only recommended in a bare minimum of cases. The decision to proceed with this

treatment is usually taken in conjunction with a (nurse) specialist in breast conditions.

- In most cases, symptoms subside after the menopause.

Summary

To summarise briefly, fibrocystic breast changes are a common breast condition. They are harmless as they do not present an increased risk of breast cancer. In most cases, further examination to make sure that breast cancer can be excluded is sufficient. Sometimes, treatment may be required. As fibrocystic breast changes are harmless, we generally attempt to treat the condition using measures that have few or no side effects.

FAQ

If you have any questions after reading this leaflet, feel free to call the Breast Clinic. You can reach us on weekdays between 08:00 and 16:30 on +31 10 893 2840.