

The lump in my breast

...then good news



Anna Magee: "My doctor got me in for a mammogram super-quick"

Each year, half a million British women have lumps in their breasts checked for cancer. Thankfully, nine out of ten are benign. Even so, such lumps can be worrying. Anna Magee shares her experience

I couldn't argue with the distinct pea I found near the nipple of my right breast one morning. I was following my own breast awareness advice that

I had written earlier that week for a magazine. That little lump of congealed something or other certainly wasn't normal. It wasn't gritty or hard like a marble – more like a ball of hard cheese.

I went to my doctor who examined me, pressing hard into the tissue of my breasts, underarms and collarbones. Along with the pea I'd found, he found another on the top right of the same breast. Yes they were lumps, he said. They were also smooth and mobile so probably nothing, but he would organize a mammogram anyway. He got me – and my panic – into my local hospital's breast care clinic for Monday. It was Friday.

Gosh, mammograms hurt. Apparently, if like me you have small breasts, details are harder to see so they have to squeeze the bejaysus out of each boob between two cold steel plates until it is

flat as a poppadom. Excruciating. I also needed an ultrasound because of the density of my breasts at 42.

"Your breasts are full of cysts," said the radiologist, pointing them out on screen. "But you don't have cancer." Turns out I have a harmless but common condition that often strikes women leading up to menopause: fibrocystic breast changes, or lumpy breasts to you or me. She inserted a fine needle into the largest cyst and I watched as six millilitres of light, greenish fluid filled the syringe, making the lump disappear. There was no blood in the fluid and it was transparent, both signs no further testing was required.

With the words "don't", "have", "cancer" making me grin stupidly, I put on my top

and left. Since then though, I have found two subsequent lumps. Both have turned out to be cysts – thankfully. Still, the mammograms are getting tedious and they continue to hurt like hell, leaving me wondering: what on earth can be done to help my lumpy breasts?

A similar scenario plays out in 480,000 women's lives each year. You find a lump. You freak out. You (hopefully) head straight to your GP. The great news is, in nine cases out of ten breast lumps are benign.

So how can we know? The truth is we can't – and experts insist that any lumps that don't feel normal to you should be checked out by your doctor. But here's a peek into what he/she is thinking when examining you. Firstly, a benign mass is usually

What on earth can be done to help my lumpy breasts?

Breast lumps that aren't cancer – a doctor's guide



Dr Michelle Mullan, a consultant breast surgeon at BMI The Priory Hospital Birmingham and NHS Worcestershire Royal Hospital explains:

FIBROCYSTIC BREAST CHANGES

These are the most common form of lumps in women in their 40s and 50s, affecting one in four women. Sometimes simply referred to as "lumpy breasts", this umbrella term covers the differences in breast tissue caused by fluctuations in the hormones oestrogen and progesterone during a woman's cycle. Such changes become more prominent at certain times in the month. There might be thickening, enlarging and general bumpiness, which often subsides post-period. These changes may be painful (see below) but not always. **WHAT CAN BE DONE?** No specific treatment is necessary, but if changes don't subside after your period, you need to be checked, ideally mid-cycle, by your GP.

BREAST PAIN

I see up to ten women a week panicking because of breast pain but cancerous lumps are not usually painful. **WHAT CAN BE DONE?** Start by getting out of underwire bras:

alternatives are not so sexy but better for breast pain. Take ibuprofen orally or try rubbing on a gel such as Voltarol. Gamma Linoleic Acid (GLA) has been shown to help too, but for severe pain, Tamoxifen, a drug used to treat breast cancer, may be prescribed for six weeks to dampen the pain cycle.

CYSTS

These are smooth, fluid-filled balls that tend to be mobile and sometimes painful. They're common and tend to appear in women aged 35-55. As levels of oestrogen drop in the lead up to menopause, the body often responds by making a cyst. They subside after menopause, but if a woman goes on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) they may continue.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? After an ultrasound, cysts which are large or painful may be drained via Fine Needle Aspiration, in which a tiny needle is inserted into the breast and the fluid is removed there and then with no anaesthetic. If the fluid is clear of blood and the lump disappears you won't need further testing. Otherwise, your doctor may send the sample for testing and refer you for further imaging tests.

FIBROADENOMA

Most common in women under 40, these develop because of an overgrowth of fibrous tissue in the

breast that can form a solid lump, again because of hormonal fluctuations. **WHAT CAN BE DONE?** If the patient is under 25 and the lump is under 3cm in diameter, no further treatment is usually necessary. Otherwise, the doctor would take a biopsy, under local anaesthetic, again using a fine needle. Once a fibroadenoma is diagnosed, the woman may choose to have it removed surgically under general anaesthetic. Because this leaves a scar many women opt to leave it alone – often advisable unless it's increasing in size. Increasingly, UK breast clinics are offering a technique called a Vacuum Assisted Biopsy: the area is frozen by local anaesthetic and the lump sucked out through a probe which leaves a tiny scar.

LIPOMA

These are lumps of fatty tissue that can occur anywhere in the body, including the breasts. **WHAT CAN BE DONE?** Once the lump has been biopsied and confirmed as lipoma no further treatment is necessary



Does having benign breast lumps increase my risk of breast cancer?

"The good news is that most breast problems or pain do not increase your risk of cancer," says Professor Louise Jones, breast cancer pathologist at Barts Cancer Institute, London. "Fibrocystic breast changes can come with cell proliferation, which very slightly increases your risk of developing breast cancer, but the increase is really low – around 1.5 per cent." So should I still be having every lump I find checked? "Yes, definitely," says Professor Jones. "A lump means a change. Just because you have had nine cysts doesn't mean you won't ever have cancer. That's not to scare you, but it's simply to be cautious and safe." w&h