

3.3 Cysts



A cyst is a fluid-filled lump.

Breast cysts are extremely common in women between the ages of 35 and 55 years. They form when ducts within the breast tissue begin to age and some areas become isolated from the main duct system. The small quantities of fluid that are normally produced by the lining of the duct cannot drain away and build up to form a fluid-filled lump.

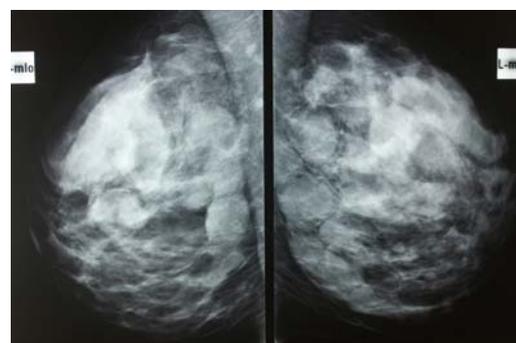
Benign cysts are not dangerous.

A cyst is most often noticed when it forms a painless lump. Occasionally they become inflamed, producing a warm, painful area, similar to an abscess.

The best way to diagnose a cyst is with ultrasound. Cysts show up as the fluid transmits sound very effectively, producing good contrast with surrounding tissue. If the cyst has any unusual features on ultrasound it should be aspirated (drained) to confirm the diagnosis.



Cyst seen on ultrasound



Multiple cysts seen on mammogram

Cysts may be seen on a mammogram as rounded densities as shown above, but they often don't show at all as they can be hidden by dense glandular tissue.

If the cyst causes a lump or pain it can be drained with a thin needle under local anaesthetic in the consulting room. The process only takes a few minutes and is usually quite painless. This procedure is best done with ultrasound-guidance to allow accurate positioning of the needle and to actually see that the cyst collapses completely. After aspiration the lump should have disappeared completely. A mammogram may be recommended to confirm that there are no other changes in the breast tissue such as calcification that may not show up on the ultrasound. Benign cysts do not require surgical removal.

Cyst fluid can vary in colour from pale green to dark brown. The colour is due to various pigments in the fluid and does not have any clinical significance. Normal cyst fluid does not need to be sent to the laboratory for testing.

Cysts may re-form in the tissue. Regular use of ultrasound in breast assessment has shown us that many women have more than one cyst. This is not surprising as they form due to involutional changes that affect all of the breast tissue.

Most cysts cannot be felt, cause no symptoms and eventually disappear without any intervention.

There is not much that you can do to stop cysts from forming. We do know however, that hormone replacement therapy can increase the number and size of cysts.

Benign cysts do not become cancerous. The biggest danger is that a solid cancerous lump may be incorrectly labelled as a cyst because it was not adequately assessed. There is also an unusual condition described as intracystic cancer. This usually has quite distinctive features on ultrasound.

WARNING:

Do not assume that a new lump is necessarily just another cyst. It may well turn out to be but it should be thoroughly assessed with at least a clinical exam and ultrasound to confirm this.

Disclaimer: this sheet is provided for information only and does not replace the need to consult your doctor for appropriate assessment and advice of any medical problem.

Extract from the book: Breast Care: Advice on all aspects of breast care by Trevor Smith 2008.

Find more information on all aspects of breast care at www.thebreastcentre.co.nz

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