



*St. Luke's
Hospital*

A Sutter Health Affiliate

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The Breast Health Center

What You Should Know about Breast Cysts

What are Breast Cysts?

Cysts are fluid-filled sacs within the breast tissue. They are thought to be caused by the ingrowth and curling inward of the milk-producing units of the breast. This is called “cystic lobular involution”.

Cysts and cystic changes are common in premenopausal women and often vary with the menstrual cycle. They are much less common in post-menopausal women. Breast cysts may be single or multiple and can vary in size from pea-sized to ping pong ball-sized or bigger.

How are Breast Cysts Diagnosed?

Because they are masses and are fluid-filled, breast cysts are often seen as shadows on mammograms and can sometimes be found on physical exam. Masses on mammogram and masses on physical exam must be investigated further. The first step is usually to get an ultrasound. Ultrasound is an excellent way to differentiate a fluid-filled (cystic) mass from a solid mass. (For more information about ultrasound, please refer to the ultrasound information sheet.)

Treatment of Breast Cysts

If the ultrasound shows that the breast cyst is a “simple cyst” (well-defined, no abnormalities on the internal wall of the cyst, no “debris” within the cyst), then it can be safely watched. No immediate action is necessary. Many cysts will resolve if left alone. Cysts are not precancerous, do not turn into cancer, and do not put women at higher risk for breast cancer. Simple cysts are not usually “drained” unless they are very large in size, are significantly increasing in size, or are painful. Cysts that are not considered “simple” by ultrasound usually need drainage or biopsy.

Does the cyst fluid need to be analyzed by the laboratory?

Normal breast cyst fluid can be yellow, green, or gray. Studies show that analysis of breast cyst fluid is of no value unless the fluid is bloody. If your breast cyst fluid shows signs of blood, then it should be sent to the laboratory for evaluation.

My doctor told me my breasts are “fibrocystic.” What does that mean?

“Fibrocystic” is a phrase that is hard to interpret. To doctors it usually means that the breasts are “lumpy and bumpy,” making examination of the breast more difficult and less reliable. In truth, the term “fibrocystic” refers to a variety of processes in the breast, some of which are normal body changes while others verge on being pathologic. The breast is made up of two components: the cells that make the milk (duct tissue) and the other supporting tissues of the breast (the “stroma”). Stroma includes fat, blood vessels, ligaments to hold the breast up, and connective tissue to hold the breast together. Monthly changes in hormonal levels can affect all these components, causing the breast to feel “lumpy and bumpy.” Having cysts or “fibrocystic” breasts can make examination of your breasts slightly more difficult and, if significant, may require yearly exams by a breast specialist.

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