

MANAGING YOUR GALACTORRHEA

What Is Galactorrhea?

Galactorrhea is a condition in which an abnormal discharge comes from the breast. A milky fluid seeps from the nipples of women who are not breast-feeding. It's fairly common in women who have had children and in women who were recently pregnant or stopped breast-feeding. It also occurs somewhat often in newborn infants (this used to be called witch's milk). In most women, it usually stops without treatment. It is a rare condition in men.

What Causes Galactorrhea?

The cause is usually irritation or stimulation of the breast, which can happen with an injury, surgery, or just squeezing the nipples. Soaps, creams, and scratchy clothing can also cause it.

In most women, galactorrhea is most likely when the level of female hormone (estrogen) changes, such as when starting or stopping birth control pills, after surgery to remove the ovaries, or after an abortion.

In women who never had a baby or in men, it can be due to a more serious problem. Such causes include medicines, kidney or liver disease, or a growth in the pituitary gland (an endocrine gland near the brain). This growth can be very serious because it may be cancerous, and this gland controls many body functions.

What Are the Symptoms of Galactorrhea?

The main symptom is a milky fluid seeping from the nipples. It may seep on its own or only if the nipples are squeezed.

How Is Galactorrhea Diagnosed?

The health care provider will do a physical examination and blood tests to measure hormone levels, such as prolactin.

Your health care provider may also order magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computed tomography (CT) of the head. These tests take pictures of the inside of the head and may show whether there is a growth on the pituitary gland.

How Is Galactorrhea Treated?

If medicine is the cause, the health care provider may recommend stopping it. If galactorrhea continues, the health care provider may prescribe a medicine that will stop it.

Surgery, radiation therapy, or medications will be used to treat a growth on the pituitary gland. With surgery, the growth will be removed. With radiation therapy, a special x-ray machine is used and causes the growth to shrink. Radiation therapy works slowly, often taking several months to shrink the tumor. Medication will decrease the abnormal hormone levels produced by the pituitary.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Galactorrhea

- ✓ **DO** wear a breast binder. A breast binder or firmly fitting bra can help prevent fabric from rubbing your nipples, which can cause stimulation or irritation and lead to galactorrhea.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider about symptoms that worry you.
- ⊗ **DON'T** squeeze your breasts or nipples. This can stimulate your breasts and cause more milky fluid to seep from your nipples.
- ⊗ **DON'T** forget follow-up health care provider appointments.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- Pituitary Network Association: Tel: (805) 499-9973; Website: <http://www.pituitary.org>
- American Academy of Family Physicians: Tel: (800) 274-2237; Website:
<http://www.aafp.org>

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