

Health | November 3, 2017 | By Korin Miller

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# What Actually Is Mastitis?

There's a reason why nursing moms are freaked out about this.



The Noun Project/Graphic by Cristina Cianci

**Breastfeeding** comes with its own set of worries that nursing moms are super familiar with—like how to keep your milk supply up, how to squeeze time into your schedule to pump, and how to avoid developing mastitis, a painful inflammation of the breast tissue.

**Mastitis is one of those things most women have never even heard of before they start nursing—and constantly think about once they do.**

There are several things that can cause mastitis, but it all comes down to a lack of milk removal, [Diana West](#), a board-certified lactation consultant with La Leche League International, tells SELF.

“Mastitis is usually preceded by a plugged milk duct, which can have many causes from underwire bras to insufficient draining of a certain area of the breast for any number of reasons,” she says.

Women can develop mastitis when they suddenly space out feedings or skip a pumping session, but it can also happen when bacteria on your skin and your baby’s mouth get into your milk ducts, [Sherry A. Ross](#), M.D., a women’s health expert and author of *She-ology: The Definitive Guide to Women’s Intimate Health. Period.*, tells SELF.

## Unfortunately, plenty of new moms have had to deal with this.

It’s hard to know exactly how often mastitis happens—it’s [estimated](#) that anywhere between 3 and 20 percent of nursing moms experience it—but women are often warned by their doctors to look out for the signs.

Those symptoms typically include a fever, muscle aches and fatigue, and an extremely tender, painful, red, and swollen breast, Dr. Ross says, adding that mastitis usually just affects one breast.

It should go without saying that this is not pleasant. “If you have ever had mastitis when breastfeeding it is a memorable experience,” she says. Women can be seriously laid up by a case of mastitis. “Often moms report that it is like having the most awful case of the flu,” Diane L. Spatz, Ph.D., a professor of perinatal nursing at the University of Pennsylvania and nurse researcher at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, tells SELF.

## Like most health conditions, some women can have mild cases of mastitis while others have more severe symptoms.

Regardless of how intense your symptoms are, it’s important to do something about them. “Mastitis begins as an inflammation, but may progress to a bacterial infection,” international board-certified lactation consultant Joan Younger Meek, M.D., R.D., chairwoman of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Breastfeeding and associate dean for Graduate Medical Education at Florida State University College of Medicine, tells SELF. At that point, you’ll need to get on antibiotics to clear it up.

If you suddenly start to experience pain while nursing and suspect that you’re developing mastitis, there are a few things you can do. Apply a warm compress to your breast and massage it to try to unplug the milk duct, Dr. Spatz says. You’ll also want to nurse and pump often to keep your milk supply moving along (and hopefully dislodge a plugged duct in the process). When you nurse, have your baby suck from the breast with mastitis first to encourage milk flow, Dr. Meek says.

Most cases of mastitis resolve within a day or two, West says, but if it goes on beyond that, call your doctor—you may need to get on antibiotics to help clear it up.

## Mastitis symptoms can resemble inflammatory breast cancer, but there are a few key differences.

Signs of [inflammatory breast cancer](#) include breast swelling, with changes in the color and texture of the skin. “The skin color of the breast can be purple or red and the texture can appear to be pitting or thickened,” Dr. Ross says. “These changes make the breast skin look like an orange peel, which is classic for this type of breast cancer.”

## **Luckily, there are a few things you can do to lower your risk of developing mastitis.**

The first is to nurse or pump regularly and make sure that you actually empty your breasts when you do it, Dr. Meek says. It's also a good idea to avoid tight bras or tops and underwire bras while nursing, she says—they can compress your breasts and increase your risk of getting a plugged duct.

If you have any area of your breast that feels full and like the milk isn't draining, apply heat to the area and massage it to try to move things along, Dr. Spatz says. Mastitis is especially a concern when women are weaning their baby, which is why doing it gradually is so important, Dr. Meek says.

If you think you might be on the road to mastitis or are already dealing with it, talk to your doctor. They should be able to guide you on next steps.