



Breast Pain – Referral Guidance

Breast pain, also known as mastalgia, is a common breast symptom affecting up to 70% women at some point in their lifetime. Breast pain accounts for 20-30% of all secondary breast care referrals, adding to the growing demand on clinical resources. Without any other breast symptoms, **isolated breast pain is rarely a sign for breast cancer**, but it can impact quality of life and provoke substantial anxiety and lead to unnecessary investigations if not appropriately assessed.

Data from the largest prospective UK cohort study (2022)¹ involving 10,830 symptomatic women attending a breast cancer diagnostic clinic found 18% presented with breast pain only, with a breast cancer incidence of 4 per 1000 (0.4%) - half the rate found through routine breast screening, which is 8 per 1000 (0.8%)².

An updated 2023 Statement from the British Society of Breast Radiology (BSBR) reaffirmed that imaging is not indicated for breast pain alone³

([bsbr-update-on-breast-pain-feb-23.pdf](#)).

Management of breast pain

Management strategies in primary care depend on the underlying cause and may range from reassurance, lifestyle advice (well-supportive bras, a low-fat diet, reducing caffeine intake), and complementary therapies, to pharmacological interventions such as a short-term use of analgesics and hormonal therapy adjustment (i.e. wean off HRT or hormonal contraception)^{4 5 6}.

Referral to secondary breast care is appropriate for persistent or unexplained pain which has not resolved after at least 3 months initial management in primary care.

Please look out for our short webinar on breast pain, details of which will be circulated in September 2025.

¹ Dave et al. 2022, No association between breast pain and breast cancer: a prospective cohort study of 10830 symptomatic women presenting to a breast cancer diagnosis clinic. British Journal of General Practice 2022; 72 (717): e234e243
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/BJGP.2021.0475>

² [Breast Screening Programme, England, 2023-24 - NHS England Digital](#)

³ British Society of Breast Radiology 2023 Statement: [bsbr-update-on-breast-pain-feb-23.pdf](#)

⁴ Hafiz et al. 2018, Clinical management of idiopathic mastalgia: a systematic review J PRIM HEALTH CARE 2018;10(4):312–323. DOI:10.1071/HC18026: [Clinical management of idiopathic mastalgia: a systematic review](#)

⁵ Breast awareness and self-breast examination leaflet (BCN): [bcc2-know-your-breasts-booklet-web.pdf](#)

⁶ Breast pain information leaflet (BCN): [bcc71-breast-pain-web-pdf.pdf](#)