

Women's Health

Itchy Nipples? 16 Possible Reasons Why You Can't Stop Scratching Your Boobs

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From a young age, you were probably taught the importance of breast health. And although you know you should do self-checks for lumps and other abnormalities, you may still have occasional concerns like itchy nipples.

It is one of many experiences that are just flat out uncomfortable, and determining the cause can be overwhelming and sometimes scary. There are several reasons why you may have itchy breasts, most of which are harmless.

"Itching is the result of inflammation or stimulation of nerves in the skin. This may be the result of dryness, allergic reactions, direct irritation, or even a result of internal health issues," says Joshua Zeichner, MD, of Zeichner Dermatology.

Most causes of itchy nipples can be easily treated with topical remedies (think: a hydrocortisone ointment) or eliminating irritants such as a poorly fitted bra. Read on for 16 potential reasons for itchy nipples and how to treat them.

1. It's super dry outside.

The skin around your nipples is a lot more sensitive than the skin on other parts of your body, says Dr. Zeichner. This may make it more prone to irritation, dryness, and inflammation, especially in the fall or winter. "Cold, dry weather strips the skin of essential oils, disrupting the outer skin layer, resulting in loss of hydration and inflammation," he explains.

How to treat it: If you're experiencing dry or flaky skin, he suggests applying a moisturizer to help repair the skin barrier. "Look for ingredients like petrolatum, ceramides, or colloidal oatmeal," says Dr. Zeichner, who often recommends Vaseline Intensive Care Advanced Repair Lotion, given that it helps build a protective seal over the skin without leaving you feeling sticky.

2. You have thyroid issues.

The thyroid is involved in the regulation of several organs, including your skin. "We know that when thyroid hormone levels are low, the skin can become dry which leads to itching," says Dr. Zeichner. But itchy nipples aren't the only possible symptom of hypothyroidism. Other symptoms include changes in your appetite, muscle aches, and fatigue, among others.

How to treat it: If you suspect you have symptoms of low thyroid hormone levels, consult your doctor, who can refer you to an endocrinologist if necessary for further evaluation.

3. You're entering menopause.

Hormonal changes occur during menopause, like a drop in estrogen production. Now that your body is producing less estrogen, the end of menstruation can also have an effect on your skin, says ob-gyn Felice Gersh, MD. "Menopause is a state of estrogen deficiency, and estrogen is key to maintaining healthy skin. Without it, the skin atrophies and becomes drier," she explains.

How to treat it: One way to avoid itchy nipples caused by menopause is to use a topical estrogen treatment, says Dr. Gersh. Consult your doctor about menopause hormone prescriptions.

4. You have eczema.

Eczema is a genetic skin disorder often made worse by environmental exposures, says Kari Martin, MD, an associate professor of dermatology at the University of Missouri School of Medicine.

An eczema rash has a pretty specific look—it's often categorized as small raised bumps or reddish patches on the skin, and it can definitely show up on your nipples. But Dr. Martin says the rash will likely appear on both your nipples and breasts.

How to treat it: Avoid harsh soaps and moisturize the skin regularly with an emollient such as petroleum jelly. You can also try an OTC hydrocortisone ointment twice a day for up to two weeks, but check with your dermatologist if your eczema flare-up doesn't clear up after that.

5. You have psoriasis.

Like eczema, psoriasis is a skin condition—but this one is caused by an autoimmune disorder.

Psoriasis also has a tell-tale look: red, scaly plaques on the skin, most commonly on the outsides of your elbows and knees, says Dr. Martin. But the rash can appear anywhere—including your breasts and nipples.

How to treat it: You'll want to see a dermatologist for this one too, but in the meantime, Dr. Martin recommends trying hydrocortisone ointment for any psoriasis-related itching.

6. You're currently using narcotics.

There are a lot of reasons why your doctor may prescribe an opioid pain reliever—severe migraines, broken bones, surgery. But while the narcotic is working to ease your pain, it might also be causing you to itch.

“Some narcotics have been reported to cause a release of histamine from cells in the body, which can cause generalized pruritus (a.k.a. itchy skin),” says Stephanie Gore, MD, an ob-gyn at CareMount Medical.

How to treat it: To combat the itch, take an oatmeal bath and keep your skin well-moisturized. If you are okay with it, you can also try taking an antihistamine, says Dr. Gore. Switching to a different medication, when possible, may also help.

7. You have an insect bite.

Insect bites might not be the first thing you think of when you've got an annoying itch on your breast, but it's totally possible. Dr. Gore says to inspect the area carefully for signs of an insect bite—like a single raised bump and redness surrounding it—and pay special attention to marks that appear in multiples, since that could mean you have a bed bug infestation (gross but true).

How to treat it: OTC hydrocortisone creams, calamine lotion, or oral antihistamines are usually good defenses against itchiness from insect bites, says Dr. Gore.

8. You've had radiation therapy for breast cancer.

Radiation therapy for breast cancer can lead to a specific type of dermatitis (a.k.a. inflammation of the skin), and Dr. Martin says the itching can start right after the patch of skin has been exposed to radiation, or even months or years later.

“It occurs because of damage and scarring from the radiation beams passing through the skin to deeper tissues,” she explains. “It usually presents as broken blood vessels and firmness of the skin. It may be painful, itchy, or have no associated symptoms at all.”

How to treat it: Like with most forms of dermatitis, moisturizing is key. But sometimes stronger topical corticosteroids are needed, in which case Dr. Martin recommends heading to your ob-gyn's office.

9. You're pregnant.

If you're expecting, you can also expect some itching to go along with that growing baby bump. Dr. Gore says normal physiological changes that occur during pregnancy, like the enlargement of the breasts in preparation for lactation, can be enough to cause a woman's boobs to itch.

"As the skin stretches to accommodate the growing breasts, it often becomes dry and irritated," she explains. "Some women develop stretch marks, which irritates the skin even more."

How to treat it: The best way to manage symptoms? Keep the skin moisturized with lotions—specifically unscented ones, to avoid further irritation, says Dr. Gore.

10. You're breastfeeding.

Intensive breastfeeding (like during the newborn period) can cause itch-inducing dryness, says Dr. Gore. Your ob-gyn can recommend a few baby-safe remedies—like medical-grade lanolin or even warm compresses—to try if your nipples have become seriously dry or cracked from breastfeeding.

If you still experience itching even with lanolin, you may have an allergy to it, explains Susan Bard, MD, a dermatologist at Vive Dermatology.

But monitor any cracked skin. Broken skin on the nipples can introduce bacteria into the milk ducts, which may result in an infection called mastitis, says Dr. Gore. This condition, which can also be caused by an overgrowth of bacteria in the breast milk thanks to infrequent feedings or blocked milk ducts, causes symptoms like pain or tenderness in the breast, as well as fever and flu-like symptoms.

How to treat it: "Discontinuation of any potential allergens or irritants is crucial," says Dr. Bard, so be careful that what you're treating your dry breasts with isn't causing further damage. If you think you have mastitis, call your doctor since you may need an antibiotic.

11. You're allergic to that new lotion you're using.

This is called allergic contact dermatitis, which occurs when someone becomes allergic to a chemical that comes in contact with their skin, says Dr. Martin. "On the nipples, this would most often be metal in a piercing, an OTC medication, a skincare product being used on that skin, or more rarely, preservatives in clothing."

This kind of dermatitis leads to a pink or red rash that's dry and itchy. It may be localized or more widespread, and could even lead to blistering and crusting, she says.

How to treat it: OTC hydrocortisone might help, but keep an eye on it—you'll need to make an appointment with your doctor if it doesn't improve.

12. Your breast is rubbing against your bra a little too much.

Irritant contact dermatitis also leads to pink and scaly or dry plaques, says Dr. Martin, and can be caused by excessive dryness from harsh cleansers or friction—on the breasts and nipples in particular. So if your bras are ill-fitting (or you frequently don't wear one at all), you might end up with chafing and irritation.

If your bras don't fit (or you go braless a lot), you might end up with itching and chafing.

Friction can also happen if your breasts are asymmetrical, e.g., one breast is a larger cup size than the other, leaving the smaller one to move around more in the cup.

How to treat it: Get yourself a proper bra fitting from a professional, and consider investing in bras designed to accommodate differently sized breasts.

13. You've recently had breast surgery.

If you've recently had any kind of breast surgery, you're probably experiencing pain, soreness, or tenderness in the days after—as well as (unfortunately) itching.

"After surgery, as part of the healing process, histamine is released and swelling of the breast occurs," says Lyda E. Rojas Carroll, MD, a general surgeon who specializes in breast surgery at CareMount Medical. "That may stimulate nerve endings and cause itching."

How to treat it: To alleviate the itching caused by swelling, Dr. Carroll recommends wearing a surgical bra and applying ice.

14. You have a rare type of breast cancer.

It's an unlikely cause of your itching, but Paget's disease of the breast is a possibility. This rare type of breast cancer occurs in the nipple then spreads to the areola, and shows up as a red, scaly rash that doesn't get better after use of topical creams, says Dr. Carroll.

A rare form of cancer called Paget's disease can cause itching on the breast.

"The itching is caused by the local skin reacting to the cancer cells growing within the nipple," Dr. Carroll explains, adding that it's extremely rare to have Paget's in both nipples. So if your itching or rash isn't exclusive to one side, it's even less likely that you have it.

How to treat it: If you're concerned, make an appointment with your doctor. Surgical treatment is likely to be recommended for this type of cancer. But again, Paget's is incredibly rare—and there's a better chance your itchiness is related to something else.

A reminder, though: Make sure to get regular dermatology cancer screenings too—Dr. Carroll says skin cancer of the breast (basal cell, squamous cell, and melanoma) can also cause itching.

15. You have a yeast or fungal infection.

Chances are you've had a vaginal yeast infection before, but the infection can show up on your boobs too.

There are a few different kinds of yeast infections you might find on your breasts, ranging from nipple and areola infections that are common with breastfeeding to infections in the fold of the skin under the breasts (thanks to the sweat and moisture that get trapped there), says Dr. Martin. These itchy rashes vary in color—either pinkish red, yellow-orange, or pinkish white—and are usually circular patches that may have a fine scale over the top.

How to treat it: "Topical antifungal medications such as clotrimazole or miconazole creams twice daily can be helpful in many cases," explains Dr. Martin. "For rashes under the breasts, keeping the skin as dry as possible and keeping a layer of clothing (like a well-fitted bra or handkerchief) between skin folds is also helpful."

16. Your period is coming.

As you may know, your period can be responsible for...well, a lot. And as it turns out, itchy nipples are a fairly common symptom of PMS. "Some women experience itchy nipples due to a hormonal influx of estrogen prior to their periods," explains [Thaïs Aliabadi, MD](#), an ob-gyn and co-founder of [Trimly](#). "The breasts are very sensitive to estrogen levels, which can lead some women to have itchy nipples when they have PMS."

How to treat it: To treat itchy nipples that stem from PMS, Dr. Aliabadi recommends using lotions, vaseline, and supplements to help with PMS symptoms such as vitamin B6 and magnesium.

When should you see a doctor?

Before you consider booking an appointment with your doctor, you should be asking yourself key questions like, "Is this chronic?" "Does it only happen before my period?" "Is it accompanied by other symptoms such as breast pain?" or "Do I have a history of eczema?"

Your answers might give you some clarity, but if you're still unsure, Dr. Aliabadi suggests seeing your primary care provider. If the itching gets worse or is accompanied by other symptoms, then schedule a visit with your ob-gyn instead.

Some symptoms can be singled out or happen in tandem with itchy nipples, according to Mary Jacobson, MD, an ob-gyn and the chief medical officer of Alpha Medical. Visiting your doctor may be the next step if you're experiencing persistent itchy nipples or itchiness that is localized to one nipple.

Additionally, you should see your doctor if the itchiness is associated with one or more of the following:

- a nipple deformity, e.g., a retracted or fixed nipple
- a change in the texture of nipple or breast skin
- thickening of breast tissue
- pain and other symptoms of mastitis while nursing
- spontaneous bloody nipple discharge

Ultimately, itchy nipples may not be signs of a major problem. However, Dr. Jacobson emphasizes that delaying the evaluation can potentially allow the problem to worsen.

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