

THE TRUTH ABOUT MASTITIS

By Lucia Leyfield, Breastfeeding Counsellor

Mastitis is something which has always been highlighted as a big breastfeeding fear in all of the breastfeeding classes I have facilitated. For many women it doesn't have to be part of the breastfeeding experience and can be avoided if the breasts are fully drained.

What is it? Mastitis is an inflammation in the tissue which surrounds the breast.

What causes it? The primary cause of mastitis is 'milk-stasis'. This is when milk leaks in to breast tissue. This can be due to many things such as: difficulty in positioning/attaching a baby to the breast (resulting breast not being fully drained), a reduction of the frequency or duration of feeds, an over abundant milk supply due to feeding multiples, a feed being dropped, feeling unusually stressed or tired out, a low immune system, ill fitting bra, engorgement, a blocked duct.

What are the symptoms? NB You may not have all of the following signs during mastitis:

- A red area on part of the breast, often the outer, upper area, which may be painful to touch. (The body reacts in the same way as it does to an infection - by increasing blood supply. This produces the inflammation (swelling) and redness.)
- A lumpy breast which feels hot to touch.
- The whole breast aches and may become red.
- Flu-like symptoms (aching, increased temperature, shivering, feeling tearful and tired this feeling can sometimes start very suddenly and get worse very quickly).

What are the treatments? In the initial stages of mastitis **self help measures** may be all that is needed to clear the condition up. If there is no improvement of your symptoms it may indicate that the milk which has leaked into your breast tissue has caused an infection. If the self help measures have not proved to be effective within 12-24 hours it is advisable to visit your doctor who may give you a course of systemic antibiotics. It is impossible to tell if non-infective mastitis has become infective but for many women a dose of antibiotics can be avoided by adopting the self help measures listed below:

- Keep on breastfeeding - you may feel ill and discouraged but continuing to breastfeed is the quickest way to get better - **and won't hurt your baby.**
- Feed your baby more frequently or express between feeds if your breasts feel uncomfortably full.
- Express gently after feeds, so that your breasts are kept as well drained as possible, until you feel better.
- Check that your baby is well positioned and attached to your breast - if in doubt contact a breastfeeding counsellor (often 'good' positioning and attachment can be made even 'better').
- Feed from the side which is sore first to drain it as thoroughly as possible.
- Try feeding with your baby in different positions.
- Soften your breast, by expressing a little milk or running warm water over it, so that the baby finds it easier to feed well. Warmth on your breast may help you to feel more comfortable.
- Use a wide toothed comb to stroke gently over the red area and towards the nipple to help the milk flow, or massage gently.
- Check for any clothing which is pressing into your breast, this includes a bra - some women find it helpful to go without a bra - bumps or knocks from toddlers can also have the same effect.
- Rest.
- Remember what you feel like, so if symptoms start to come back, you can start self help measures right away.

How will mastitis affect my baby? Continued breastfeeding during mastitis will not harm the baby as antibodies in the mother's milk will protect the baby from any bacteria. Temporary weaning from the breast is not necessary and tends to cause upset on the part of the baby and discomfort on the mothers part.

During mastitis, milk can, in some instances, taste saltier and the baby may be reluctant to feed from the affected breast. This should only be temporary and the milk will very soon lose its salty taste.

If you are prescribed a course of antibiotics by your GP they will be licensed to use whilst breastfeeding and will not harm the baby. During and after the course it may be worth increasing your intake of live yogurt/ yogurt drinks to boost your 'good bacteria' and reduce your risk of developing thrush.

If you would like to discuss your breastfeeding experience in relation to mastitis or any other breastfeeding issue please feel free to contact me, Lucia Leyfield, NCT breastfeeding counsellor on 01666 841281.