

NIPPLE VASOSPASM



the women's
the royal women's hospital
victoria australia

This fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage nipple vasospasm and breastfeed more comfortably.

What is vasospasm?

Vasospasm occurs when blood vessels tighten and cause pain because normal blood flow is restricted. People who are affected by vasospasm are most likely to notice this in their fingers. Some people notice that the ends of their fingers or toes turn white when cold; this is also known as Raynaud's phenomenon. Less commonly, blood vessels in the nipples are affected, causing pain during, immediately after, or between breastfeeds.

Who is likely to have vasospasm?

Some women are more likely than others to have nipple vasospasm, these include women:

- with a family history of Raynaud's phenomenon
- who tend to have cold fingers or feet or have "poor circulation"
- who are below average body weight for their height.

Common signs of nipple vasospasm

- Intense nipple pain, particularly when cold, sometimes described as burning and throbbing
- Blanched or whitened nipples which may then change to a purple or red before returning to their normal colour
- The pain and colour changes can last for varying amounts of time, a few seconds or can be longer

How severe is nipple vasospasm?

Nipple vasospasm pain ranges from minor discomfort to severe pain. Some women may feel that the pain is so severe that they feel they are unable to continue breastfeeding.

Managing nipple vasospasm

Keep your nipples warm – this may help to relieve pain immediately.

- Wear an extra layer of clothing.
- Apply warmth to your nipple, such as a warm pack.
- Use "breast warmers", e.g. Flectalon.

- Use large breast pads which will help keep your nipple warmer.
- Do not 'air' your nipples.
- Warm your bathroom before undressing for showers, etc.

Also avoiding or reducing known situations that can cause vasospasm will help, such as:

- poor attachment to the breast, nipple damage, cracked nipples, or nipple infections such as thrush - (seek advice from your midwife or lactation consultant)
- exposing your nipples to the cold
- some medicines or chemicals which may worsen nipple spasm such as nicotine (smoking cigarettes).

If the pain continues, consider taking supplements or medication, these include:

- supplements
 - fish oil capsules (containing essential fatty acids) or evening primrose oil (gamma linoleic) which may improve blood vessel relaxation
 - magnesium tablets help to relax the blood vessels (1-2 x 300mg tablets daily)
- medication: prescription medication may be appropriate. Contact a lactation consultant or medical professional for more advice.

For more information and advice

Your local Maternal & Child Health Nurse (MCHN)

Local council breastfeeding clinic

(ask MCHN for details or check your council website)

Victorian Maternal & Child Health Line (24 hours)

T: 13 22 29

Australian Breastfeeding Association

T: 1800 686 268 – Breastfeeding Helpline

W: www.breastfeeding.asn.au