Royal United Hospitals Bath
NHS Foundation Trust

Gynaecomastia: When breasts form in boys and men

What is gynaecomastia?

Gynaecomastia is a condition in which firm breast tissue forms in boys or men. Gynaecomastia may be present on one or both sides. This condition may make the breast tender. Some men and boys have fat on their chests that makes it look like they have breasts. This condition is called “False Gynaecomastia”. It is not the same thing as Gynaecomastia.

What causes gynaecomastia?

Gynaecomastia is usually caused by changes in hormones at puberty or as part of aging. Gynaecomastia may be caused by changes in the balance of 2 hormones: oestrogen and testosterone. In some cases, Gynaecomastia may be caused by prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, illegal drugs, tumours or disease.

Are tests needed to find the cause of gynaecomastia?

Sometimes tests are needed, and sometimes they're not. Your doctor will ask you questions about your symptoms, such as how long you've had the breast tissue, and whether or not the area is tender. Your doctor will also ask you about any illnesses you may have had in the past, medicines you take, and other matters relating to your health. Then you will have a physical examination. Whether you need tests depends on your age and what your doctor learns from your history and physical examination. Gynaecomastia is common in teenage boys. As many as 65% of 14-year-old boys have Gynaecomastia. If you are a teenager, you probably will not need tests. Your breast enlargement will probably go away on its own in 2 or 3 years. However, younger boys and adult men who have Gynaecomastia may need to have some tests. In these cases, it is possible that some kind of disease may be causing the problem. You may need to have a mammogram, an ultrasound scan, and rarely a biopsy. You may also need to have blood tests and a chest x-ray.

How is gynaecomastia treated?

In most cases, no treatment is needed. In 90% of teenage boys, Gynaecomastia goes away in less than 3 years. Sometimes the problem can be solved if you stop taking a medicine that is causing Gynaecomastia or stop using an illegal drug that is causing the problem. Occasionally, medicines may be used to treat Gynaecomastia, especially if tenderness is a problem. The medicine may make the extra breast tissue go away. Rarely, surgery or liposuction may be necessary to remove the extra breast tissue. If Gynaecomastia is caused by a disease or a tumour, treatment for that disease will be necessary.

Could the breast lump be cancer?

Most unlikely. Breast cancer is very rare in males. Breast cancer feels different than the breast tissue of Gynaecomastia. Breast cancer may also cause dimpling of the skin or a bloody discharge from the nipple. Routine imaging (Ultrasound or Mammogram) and investigations will determine if a breast swelling is a cancer.

Further information and contact details

If you have any questions, please contact the RUH Breast Unit on 01225 825881

Source: Edited from American Academy of Family Physicians information sheet.

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