Breast tenderness related to menstruation

Dear Alice,

I was just wondering about having a little discomfort in one of my breasts. I am on the pill and it usually occurs a week or two before my period and lasts about a week or so. My breast feels like it is bruised or something, like it is uncomfortable to lay on or even touch. Is this something to worry about or just an effect of the pill? Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Some women have breast discomfort or pain right before their period, while for others, this starts during ovulation and continues until their period begins. It is common, however, for a woman's breasts to feel "bruised" or extremely sensitive right before menstruation. Often times, breast discomfort is caused by fluctuations in hormone levels throughout the menstrual cycle (regardless if women are on the pill or not). Sometimes birth control pills are prescribed to help alleviate this achiness or tenderness. In addition, that bruised feeling can be a side effect of the pill.

Some women have breast discomfort or pain that is bilateral, meaning that it affects both breasts. Other women only experience discomfort in one breast, which may be because one breast has more tissue than the other. While the medical community has a general understanding of female hormones and their roles in women's bodies, there are still questions about how the hormones affect other parts of the body, including the breasts.

While it is likely that the "bruised" feeling you describe is a side effect of the pill, it's recommended that you check your breasts throughout your cycle to find out what is "normal" for you, as a baseline. You can do this by taking note, literally on a calendar, of any discomfort before and during your period. Then, once you have been off your active pills for seven days, you can do a breast self-exam. Check for any unusual lumps, increased areas of sensitivity or pain, or other changes that may be a cause of concern. If you detect something or just want reassurance, you can make an appointment to see your primary care provider.

Detailed instructions on how to do a breast self-exam can be found on the American Cancer Society's website. For more information about healthy breasts, breast problems, and diagnosis, check out the related questions as well.

Alice!

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