Dear Alice,

During sex, my husband likes to squeeze and suck my nipples. I enjoy this, but am worried that this type of pressure on the nipples may cause problems later on: we are planning on having a baby in a few years, and I want to breastfeed. Might the pressure of squeezing and sucking hurt my mammary glands and ducts, making it difficult or impossible for me to breastfeed?

Thanks,
Concerned Future Mom

Answer

Dear Concerned Future Mom,

To “nip” your concern in the bud — nipple play using pressure and stimulation during sex is unlikely to cause breastfeeding issues in the future. Folks experience pleasure from nipple stimulation, both as receivers and givers. Some like soft sensations, while others prefer more intensity, including gentle biting, pinching the nipples, or even using piercings, clamps, or other items for additional pleasure. After a particularly long or (consensually) rough period of nipple play, it's possible to experience some soreness or uncomfortable levels of sensitivity. This generally isn't a cause for concern, as long as the exchange was pleasurable and consensual. However, any experience that may cause injury to the breast tissue may cause some complications with breastfeeding (more on this in a bit). Maintaining communication with a partner during the experience can help ensure that all parties are enjoying the sensations throughout.
Pressure and stimulation are unlikely to cause lasting injury to the internal structure of the breast, but any type of trauma that causes scarring of the nipple and its surrounding tissue have the potential to cause complications with breastfeeding. In particular, scarring in or around the milk ducts can cause blockages. However, the milk ducts and lobules, which are essential to breast feeding, are covered by layers of fat, so unless you and your husband are participating in extremely rough nipple-play (i.e., play that results in cuts, tears, or crushing of nipple and breast tissue, causing scarring to occur), it’s unlikely that damage would result that would prevent breastfeeding.

Direct injury to the milk ducts is rare, and usually only occurs in extreme cases. The most common form of breast harm is fat necrosis, which is when breast tissue is damaged. As the body works to heal the damaged tissue, it may create firm scar tissue in place of the damaged cells, or the cells die and the waste products create fluid-filled sacs called oil cysts. Oil cysts and fat necrosis may form a painless but noticeable lump in the breast that might have a bruised or red appearance. They tend to disappear on their own with time, but in some cases, a medical provider may need to help release fluid from the cyst through needle aspiration or surgery.

Any time the nipple or breasts have scars or cuts, there’s a heightened possibility of infection. In some cases, individuals may develop infected lumps known as mastitis, which may lead to breastfeeding complications. For folks who are currently breastfeeding, mastitis can sometimes be confused with a plugged milk duct, which presents as a painful lump in the breast and can be cleared through massage and regular feedings. Some signs of infection to look out for are fever, nausea, non-milk discharge from the nipple, or the breasts becoming hot to the touch. While it’s possible for mastitis to pass on its own, some people might need a prescription to treat it.

Even those who are actively breastfeeding can still enjoy nipple stimulation without hindering their ability to breastfeed. Some people who breastfeed experience heightened nipple sensitivity and discomfort at first, as parent and child both learn to nurse effectively. Gradually, nipples toughen and the sensation changes, as the two get used to each other during this process. Many parents successfully breastfeed their children for up to several years, without harmful effects or complications. Similarly, they can still enjoy sexual stimulation and pleasure with their partner(s).

Although serious breast damage may affect breastfeeding, nipples are tougher than some might expect. Now that you know, feel free to enjoy their many incredible functions!

Alice!

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