

## Lactating but not nursing <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

I have not nursed in a year-and-a-half. Why does my breast still lactate?

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

The Milky Way contains its fair share of mysteries, but this milky situation probably isn't one of them! It's not unusual for milky discharge to continue for up to two to three years after discontinuing breastfeeding and it typically affects both breasts. That said, some people (regardless of their sex assigned at birth or whether they've breastfed before) can experience milk production or milky discharge called galactorrhea. Curious to learn more about causes and symptoms of galactorrhea? Read on!

Galactorrhea can happen to anyone, but it's most frequent in those assigned female at birth ages 20 to 35 and in people who have previously given birth. A release of a milky substance from one or both breasts is usually caused by excess production of the milk-making hormone, prolactin, which is triggered by the pituitary gland in the brain.

If you're experiencing milky discharge from the breasts, some additional symptoms to look out for include:

- Missed periods or other menstrual changes
- Vaginal dryness
- Headaches
- Lowered sex drive
- New hair growth on the chest or chin
- Acne

*List adapted from [Cleveland Clinic](#) [2].*

Galactorrhea itself isn't a health risk, but it can occasionally be a sign of serious concern. Many cases of galactorrhea are considered to be idiopathic, which means they have no known cause.

Some common causes of galactorrhea include:

- Over stimulating the breasts (through sexual activity, frequent self-exams, or irritating clothing)
- Herbal supplements (i.e., fennel, anise, or fenugreek seed)
- Stress
- Certain medications (i.e., birth control pills, blood pressure medicine, antidepressants, or opioids)
- Thyroid disorders
- Chronic kidney disease
- A pituitary tumor (typically non-cancerous)

List adapted from [Cleveland Clinic](#) [2] and [Mayo Clinic](#) [3].

While ongoing milk production is a common experience after breastfeeding, if you're experiencing any of the symptoms associated with galactorrhea or if your lactation situation is bothersome, you may want to reach out to a health care provider. They can investigate any potential causes and then make appropriate recommendations to remedy the situation.

Alice!

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Published date:

Nov 21, 2003

Last reviewed on:

Jun 26, 2020

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