

Herzl Family Practice Centre, Goldfarb Breastfeeding Clinic

**Nipple vasospasm
Patient handout**

Definition:

- Vasospasm is when our blood vessels contract or become smaller in diameter and blood flow is restricted.
- Vasospasm can happen with exposure to cold or emotional stress, but in some people, it can cause pain.
- In some breastfeeding mothers, the blood vessels in the nipple can spasm, known as “nipple vasospasm”.

Risk factors for nipple vasospasm:

- Exposure to cold temperatures.
- Periods of severe emotional stress
- Cigarette smoking or second-hand smoke
- Certain medical conditions such as Raynaud’s disease, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and hypothyroidism
- Certain medications such as Fluconazole/Diflucan (thrush treatment) or the birth control pill.
- Nipple cracks or trauma
- Poor latch or biting
- Migraines

Nipple vasospasm may sometimes feel like a thrush infection of the nipple or breast. However, nipple or breast candida infection is actually not common.

How can I tell if I have nipple vasospasm?

- You may have mild to severe nipple/breast pain:
 - The pain could be burning, throbbing, stabbing, deep, numbing, like pins and needles or electrical shocks.
 - The pain can last from seconds to hours and come during or in between feeds.
 - The pain may get worse when the nipples are exposed to cold, i.e. when you step outside in cold weather, or when you get out of a hot shower.
 - When you are having the pain, your nipples may change color to pale/white, blue/purple, or dark red. These color changes are a sign that your blood vessels are contracting or spasming but are not a concern if they are not painful.

Things to try at home:

- First of all, make sure your baby has a **good latch** and that you have no pain while nursing.
- **Heat** is very important. Make sure you stay warm and protect your nipples at all times. When baby comes off the breast or when you are having the pain, you can quickly apply warm dry heat or the palm of your hand on the nipple for immediate relief. Applying warm dry heat any time between feeds may also be helpful, including using a heating pad or microwaveable pad.
- **Massaging** and stretching your pectoral muscle/chest wall or your breast may help when you are having vasospasm. A health professional can show you how to do this.
- Staying **active** with some aerobic exercise may help.
- **Avoid cigarette** smoking and second-hand smoke.
- **Decrease caffeine** use.

It is important to seek professional help as soon as possible if this problem is continuing despite your efforts.

Treatments for nipple vasospasm:

- The use of Advil™ or Motrin™ (ibuprofen) and/or Tylenol™ (acetaminophen) may be very useful to treat the pain of nipple vasospasm. These medications are safe during breastfeeding
- Your health professional may suggest high doses of **calcium** and **magnesium**, and **vitamin B6**. Please consult your health professionals for doses specific to your case.
- **Omega fatty acids** may also help. Evening primrose oil and fish oil capsules are rich sources of omega fatty acids. You can also try Gamma Linoleic Acid (GLA).
- **Ginger** may be beneficial in capsule form, in a tea, or as part of your diet.
- **Nifedipine (Adalat™)**, which are normally used for high blood pressure, can also be used for nipple vasospasm, and is safe for breastfeeding mothers and infants.
 - Usually it is prescribed for a few weeks, and this may be enough to get rid of the nipple pain. However, some mothers have to take them for longer times.
 - Your blood pressure will usually be checked by your physician before Nifedipine is prescribed to you, because this medication may lower your blood pressure.
 - If you have any side effects like dizziness, feeling faint, headache, palpitations, flushing or leg swelling, you should stop the medication and contact your physician as soon as possible.

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