



Breast changes during and after pregnancy

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Introduction

This booklet looks at the changes that can happen to a woman's breasts during pregnancy and after she has her baby.

The hormones released during pregnancy and after birth cause lots of changes in a woman's body. Some of these changes will be to a woman's breasts as her body is preparing to feed her baby.

This booklet covers the main breast changes women experience during pregnancy but it's also important to continue to be breast aware at this time. Being breast aware is about becoming familiar with your breasts and how they change throughout your life. It means knowing how your breasts look and feel normally so that you feel confident about noticing any change that might be unusual for you. Sometimes this can be more difficult during pregnancy because of normal changes to the breasts at this time. If you are unsure about any change to your breasts talk to your midwife or GP (local doctor).

'In the early stage of pregnancy, I noticed immediately that my breasts were tender and sore. They seemed like they were changing shape. I thought I was pregnant as soon as they became more sensitive and the test two weeks later confirmed this.'

Sarah B

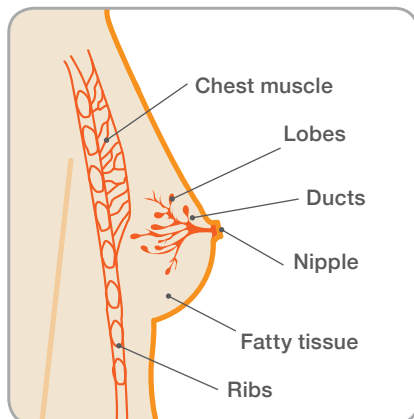
The breasts

The breasts are mainly made up of fatty tissue that starts high on the front of the chest and continues down and around into the armpit. They are supported by ligaments and the large chest muscle.

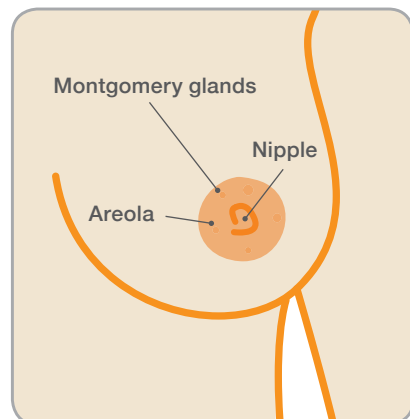
Each breast has 15–20 lobes with a number of lobules made up of milk-producing cells and ducts, surrounded by glandular, fibrous and fatty tissue. Each lobule has a main duct that opens onto the nipple. The darker area of skin around the nipple is called the areola. On the areola there are some little raised bumps. These are called Montgomery glands and are normal. They produce fluid to moisturise the nipple.

Changes happen to your breasts during pregnancy to prepare them for feeding a baby. These changes are caused by the increase in the hormones oestrogen and progesterone and of prolactin – the hormone which triggers the production of milk.

The breast



The nipple



What happens to the breasts during pregnancy?

Changes to the breasts are usually one of the early signs of pregnancy. This may include tenderness of the nipple and breast along with an increase in breast size. This varies from woman to woman. You may notice a big change in the size of your breasts or very little change at all. An increase in size may make your breasts feel heavy and tender. The breast tissue extends up into the armpit, and some women have additional breast tissue (accessory breast tissue) under the arm; you may find that this also gets bigger in size.

Many women feel a change in sensation in their breasts such as tingling and soreness (particularly of the nipples). This is due to increased levels of the hormone progesterone and the development of the milk ducts. As your pregnancy progresses the nipples and areola become darker in colour and the veins on the surface of the breast may become more noticeable. The Montgomery glands that sit on the areola get bigger and can become more noticeable.

From about 16 weeks of pregnancy the breasts are able to produce milk. It is not unusual for the nipples to leak small amounts of straw-coloured fluid known as colostrum. This is normal and not something to be concerned about. Colostrum is often called the 'first milk' and is full of nutrients and antibodies designed to provide the baby with additional protection during the first few days. If you are leaking colostrum and are worried that it may be noticeable on your clothes you can put a breast pad (a disposable or washable fabric pad) inside your bra.

A few women may have occasional leakage of blood from the nipple. This is due to the increased number and sudden growth of blood vessels. Although this can be normal during pregnancy, it is best to get any leakage of blood from the nipple checked by your GP.

In the last few weeks of pregnancy the nipples become larger and the breasts continue to expand as the milk-producing cells get bigger.

Breast lumps

Breast lumps sometimes occur during pregnancy. The most common ones are cysts (fluid-filled sacs), galactoceles (milk-filled cysts) and fibroadenomas (which develop in the lobules of the breast). These are benign (not cancer) breast conditions. If you already have a fibroadenoma you may find this gets bigger during pregnancy.

The vast majority of lumps in pregnancy will be benign as breast cancer in women of child-bearing age is uncommon and even less common during pregnancy. However, you should get any new breast lump checked by your GP. If you have an existing breast problem – like a cyst or fibroadenoma – make your GP or midwife aware of this and tell them if it changes.

Breast discomfort

The growth of the breasts can cause discomfort and sometimes pain. This can be helped by wearing a well-fitting bra (see opposite). It's fine to sleep in your bra if it helps reduce the discomfort. Pregnant women are usually advised to avoid taking certain types of pain relief, but if your breasts are particularly painful you may want to take paracetamol. Talk to your GP or midwife if you need further advice.

'During my pregnancy, my breasts grew from a B cup to a D. They felt like they needed extra support which led me to wearing a support bra in bed.'

Leanne

Bras

As your breasts grow you should check that your bra isn't too tight as this can cause discomfort. It's worth visiting a department store or lingerie shop to be measured and to have your bra size checked by a trained bra fitter, or contact a National Childbirth Trust (NCT) bra fitter (see the 'Further support' section on page 23).

A bra fits well if:

- it's not too tight or too loose
- your breasts fill the cup of the bra leaving no loose fabric and contain the whole breast without any bulging at the top, bottom or sides
- the strap at the back doesn't cut in
- the shoulder straps don't carry the full weight of your breasts, stay in place when you lift your arms above your head, and fit closely to your body without digging in
- the strap round the back and the front underband lie close to your body and are at the same level at the front and back
- with an underwired bra, the underwire lies flat against your body and supports the underneath and sides of your breast without digging in or gaping.

'I would tell all pregnant women to buy a few cotton maternity bras from a specialist shop where they can be measured and given specialised advice and information about pregnancy breast care.'

Louise

'I bought a number of maternity bras without wires and started wearing these from around four months pregnant. I also started wearing nursing bras at about eight months to get used to wearing them (unclipping, etc).'

Sarah B

It's sometimes suggested that pregnant women shouldn't wear underwired bras as the wiring can sometimes cause blockages in the milk ducts. However, there is no evidence to support this. As long as the bra fits you well and the wires of the bra aren't digging in, there is no reason to stop wearing an underwired bra. However, you may find it more comfortable to wear a maternity or soft cup bra. These types of bras can also be worn in bed if you feel you need extra support while sleeping.

If you are intending to breastfeed once your baby is born you may want to buy a couple of nursing bras. These have cups which unhook or unzip and make it easier to feed your baby. The best time to be fitted for a nursing bra is a few weeks before your due date when your breasts will have done the majority of their growing. If you go to a department store or lingerie shop to be fitted for your nursing bra the fitter should take into account that your breasts will get even bigger when you start producing milk, but will probably settle down again later. The fitter will probably suggest going up one or two cup sizes to allow for this. A wide range of bras are available from specialist maternity bra suppliers, to order online and from department stores and lingerie shops.

For more information on finding a bra that fits correctly see our leaflet **Your guide to a well-fitting bra.**

Breast changes after birth

After childbirth oestrogen and progesterone levels decrease rapidly. Around the third day or so following the birth the colostrum becomes diluted by additional fluid which makes it look much whiter. It's around this time that the breasts start to leak milk.

When a baby suckles at the mother's breast it triggers nerves carrying messages to the brain that milk is needed. A hormone known as oxytocin is released from the brain to send milk to the ducts behind the nipple. This is known as the 'let down' reflex. This let down reflex is very powerful and some women may find milk leaks from the nipple when they hear their baby cry or if their breasts are full and they feel emotional.

It can sometimes be embarrassing when you feel you can't control this reflex and you leak milk. This can happen quite a lot in the first few days after you give birth, not just when you are feeding. Putting disposable or washable breast pads in your bra can help you feel more comfortable.

Oxytocin is released during each breastfeed. The oxytocin can cause contractions in the womb among many women. These are sometimes known as afterpains and help the uterus to return to its normal, pre-pregnancy size. These afterpains usually stop after a few days.

'I didn't notice much difference straight away after I had given birth. A couple of days later my breasts were increasingly uncomfortable. They felt really hard, lumpy and painful.'

Michelle

Breastfeeding

The changes that happen to the breasts during pregnancy are to prepare your breasts for feeding a baby. Whether or not you breastfeed is entirely your decision. There's evidence to show that breastfeeding has health benefits for both you and your baby. For example, breastfeeding over a period of time can slightly reduce your risk of breast cancer (however, this does depend on how long you breastfeed for and other factors like your age and the number of children you have).

The closeness and sense of satisfaction can also help you to bond with your baby. The benefits for your baby are that breast milk contains antibodies that help fight infections. It's all the food and drink your baby needs in their early days. The Department of Health recommends exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months of your baby's life and then to continue breastfeeding alongside solid foods for as long as mother and baby wish.

Although breastfeeding is a very natural process it can sometimes take a little time to get right and some women find it difficult.

'I was determined to breastfeed. I did find it much harder than I had ever anticipated it to be. My instinct told me that my baby wasn't latching on properly so I attended a breastfeeding workshop at the hospital where I was shown the correct way to get my baby to latch on and which helped us massively and reassured me.'

Emma



Encouraging the baby to attach to the breast correctly is a learned skill. Some women are also anxious and concerned about their baby getting enough milk. Your midwife or health visitor will be able to help you with breastfeeding and the different techniques you can use. There may also be a breastfeeding support group in your local area where you can share your experiences with other mothers. Additionally, there are organisations with trained breastfeeding counsellors that may be able to help. Some of these are listed at the back of this booklet.

Some women choose not to breastfeed, either because it hasn't been possible or they simply don't feel it is the right choice for them and their baby. There isn't a right or wrong decision; you just need to feel you have made the best decision for you and your baby.

Women who have had breast surgery, due to breast cancer, breast reduction or breast implants for example, may find that they are unable to breastfeed. However, some women find that even after surgery to the breast they are still able to breastfeed. Again, you may want to ask your midwife, health visitor or breastfeeding counsellor for help.

'At first, I managed to feed comfortably immediately after birth, but upon leaving hospital after two nights, feeding became progressively more painful. My breasts were incredibly sore and my nipples were being bitten. Getting my baby to latch on was the biggest challenge in the first few weeks. However, after quite a few lows – feeling continually frustrated and sad that I was finding it so difficult – everything got so much easier. I found positions which worked and I am glad I stuck with it.'

Sarah B

Possible breast problems

This section looks at what happens when your milk ‘comes in’ (when your body begins to produce breast milk and no longer colostrum) and any problems you may experience. The following information may apply to women who breastfeed and women who have decided not to and want to stop their milk supply.

It’s not unusual to experience some problems with your breasts when your breast milk comes in and in the first few weeks afterwards. Many of these problems are caused by inflammation or infection of the breast. However, many women don’t experience problems at all.

Sore and cracked nipples

Sore and cracked nipples are not an inevitable part of breastfeeding. They occur if the baby does not latch on correctly. If the baby sucks the nipple only, rather than the whole areola being in the mouth, the nipples can quickly become sore and sometimes cracked because the baby’s tongue or roof of the mouth is rubbing on the nipple. Ask for support and advice from a midwife or breastfeeding counsellor if feeding is in any way painful. National breastfeeding helplines are also detailed at the end of this booklet. If one breast is less sore, try to feed from that one first, so that if you need to swap to the other breast the baby will feed less strongly.

Some women find nipple shields useful if their nipples are very sore. These are made of thin, soft silicone and are placed over the nipple. Milk flows to the baby from holes at the tip of the shield. Using nipple shields sometimes allows time for the nipples to heal. However, they don’t work for everyone and some babies will refuse to feed through a nipple shield or may refuse to go back to feeding directly from the breast without one.

Engorgement

Breast engorgement is overfullness of the breast and is a common problem. Approximately two to three days after giving birth the woman's breasts fill with milk and so the breasts become heavy and swollen. Breast engorgement occurs if the baby removes less milk from the breast when feeding than the amount that the mother produces. Some women have described their breasts as feeling hard, warm and throbbing. Breast engorgement generally happens after the first few days when the milk first comes into the breasts or later on when there is a longer time between feeds. It can also happen if the breasts are not fully emptied, if the baby is having difficulty attaching to the breast or if you have decided not to breastfeed or if breastfeeding is suddenly stopped.

If you are continuing to breastfeed, engorgement can be treated by feeding on demand and altering the feeding position to ensure the breast is being fully emptied. If the baby is not able to empty the breast you may find it useful to express the milk away by hand or by using a breast pump (these can either be electronic or hand held). Your midwife, health visitor or a breastfeeding counsellor will be able to show you how to hand express.

Some women have found massaging the breast in a circular motion down to the nipple as the baby feeds useful in ensuring the breast is fully emptied. Other women have found placing ice packs (covered with a towel or flannel) on the breast after feeding helpful to reduce the swelling.

'There were numerous times when I suffered with engorgement as my baby only fed every four hours. I used breast pads in my bra and to ease discomfort, I would press a warm flannel against them. If they were very full, I started expressing from one breast while feeding my baby on the other. I put the milk in storage bags in the freezer to use later.'

Michelle

'I had a minor problem a few weeks in when I realised quite early that I had a blocked duct. Luckily for me, warm showers/baths and massage of the painful area fixed it quickly.'

Polly

Blocked milk ducts

Sometimes a milk duct within the breast may become blocked while breastfeeding. This can also occur once breastfeeding has stopped. You may experience a small, painful, hard lump or a bruised feeling. Feeding the baby more often and a change of position may help to drain the area more fully. Gently massaging the lump towards the nipple before feeding can help clear it. Applying warm flannels to the breast has also been helpful for many women. You may also want to ensure that your bra isn't too tight as this can also cause blocked ducts.

Mastitis

If engorgement or blockage to the ducts continues, an inflammation or infection may occur. This is known as mastitis. It may also occur because of an infection from a crack or graze in the nipple. It causes flu-like symptoms such as headache, nausea and a raised temperature. If you think you may have mastitis you will need to see your doctor as it may need treating with antibiotics or anti-inflammatory drugs.

Continuing to breastfeed frequently helps to clear the infection and is not harmful to the baby as any bacteria are killed in the baby's stomach. Expressing milk either by hand or by using a breast pump may help ensure the breast has been fully emptied. Before feeding, applying a flannel soaked in warm water to the affected area of the breast may help stimulate the milk flow.

'I had mastitis and first of all rested and tried to massage away the swelling, but it didn't work. I got more and more tired and the pain was awful. I went to the doctors who prescribed antibiotics which sorted it out pretty quickly.'

Kate

Following feeding, ice packs applied to the breast may ease the swelling and discomfort, but make sure you cover the pack with a flannel or towel to protect your skin. Drinking plenty of fluids will also help, as will getting enough rest, although this may be difficult with a new baby to care for. Accept any offers of help and try to take opportunities to rest when you can.

Breast abscess

If mastitis or an infection isn't treated some women go on to develop an abscess (a collection of pus) in the breast. Breast abscesses are not common – if you think you have an abscess it is very important to see your doctor. Abscesses are usually drained using a needle and syringe.

Your GP may be able to do this but it is more likely that you will be referred to your local hospital for this to be done in a breast clinic. If the abscess is large, a small cut is made in it to let the pus drain away. Often an injection of local anaesthetic is given to numb the area first.

As with mastitis it's important to continue breastfeeding or use a breast pump to express the milk regularly. Your GP will advise you whether to continue breastfeeding from this breast or not. You can continue to breastfeed as normal from the unaffected breast.

Thrush

Thrush (*candida albicans*) is a yeast infection that may occur on the nipple and areola during breastfeeding. This can happen suddenly even when breastfeeding has been well established. It can also take place following cracking or damage to the nipple. The nipple may become itchy, painful and sensitive to touch.

Some women find they have shooting pains deep in the breast that start after feeding and can last for a few hours. If the pain is particularly severe it may mean that the thrush has got into the milk ducts.

Thrush can be difficult to distinguish as many of the signs of it are similar to those caused by the baby not being latched on to the breast properly during breastfeeding (see section on 'Sore and cracked nipples' on page 15).

Thrush can also be passed from mother to baby. Signs of thrush in your baby may include a creamy patch on the tongue or in the mouth which does not rub off, restlessness during feeding, pulling away from the breast and nappy rash (red rash or soreness that is slow to heal).

You may find you need to take pain relief to ease the pain caused by thrush. Both you and your baby will need to have treatment at the same time. Your GP will be able to prescribe creams or gels to apply to the nipple area following each feed along with a gel for the baby's mouth. You may also need to take medicine in the form of tablets if the thrush has affected the ducts. It may take two or three days for the treatment to start working and a little while for it to clear up completely.

Some women find practical solutions can be helpful in settling thrush. Maintaining good hygiene and using a separate towel will help prevent spreading the thrush to other family members. If you have expressed milk and stored it in the freezer during the time you or your baby have thrush, it's best to throw this away as it may cause the thrush to come back. However, you can continue to breastfeed.

What happens if I don't breastfeed, or want to stop?

Women continue to produce milk as long as breastfeeding continues. Once you have stopped it may take some time for the milk production to stop completely. In the first few days after birth the milk stops very quickly, but later, if breastfeeding has been established, it takes longer.

When breastfeeding stops the breasts will slowly reduce in size. If you choose not to breastfeed and no milk is being removed a chemical signal will quickly stop more milk being made and the milk production will stop. In the meantime, you will probably find that your breasts feel heavy, uncomfortable and sore. Sometimes this can lead to engorgement (see page 16). Wearing a supportive bra and taking pain relief may help during these first few days.

If you have been breastfeeding and want to stop you should gradually reduce the length and number of your breastfeeds. This will naturally allow the production of milk to reduce. You can also express the milk by hand or by using a breast pump. You will need to do this frequently to begin with and then reduce it gradually over a number of days. Your body produces milk on a supply and demand basis so if you express milk less and less over time your body won't replace it. You may find it best not to stop too quickly, as this can lead to engorgement. Milk may leak for several weeks after stopping if something triggers the 'let down' reflex. This is where you may experience a tingling feeling in your breasts and nipples, which can be quite strong a feeling of sudden fullness or you may notice that milk starts to leak from the either or both breasts.

Many women continue breastfeeding on going back to work. It may be possible for you to build up to working again gradually and possibly negotiate flexible working hours with your employer in order to combine work and breastfeeding. Expressing milk using a breast pump may be another option so that someone else can feed your baby while you're at work. If you have a Human Resources (HR) department, they may be able to help you prepare for your return to work. It may be possible to give you a private room where you can express your milk or breastfeed your baby.

'I stopped breastfeeding Herbie when he was six weeks old and for me it was the right decision. He was a lot happier and so was I! I did not have any problems with full breasts as I regularly expressed.'

Louise

Your breasts after pregnancy

After pregnancy, whether you have breastfed or not, your breasts probably won't look or feel the same as they used to.

You may have gained or lost weight. It is not unusual to find your breasts have altered in size and shape compared with before pregnancy. If you have breastfed you may have lost some of the volume in your breasts. Some women don't like the changes to their breasts post-pregnancy while others accept the changes to their breasts as they have played an important part in their child's early days.

All these changes are normal and are part of the changes your breasts go through at different stages in life. It's important that you get to know how your breasts now look and feel so you can be aware of any new changes. You can find out more about breast awareness from our **Your breasts, your health throughout your life** booklet.

Further support

Breastfeeding Network (BfN)

PO Box 11126, Paisley PA2 8YB

Support line: 0300 100 0210

Email: enquiries@breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk

Website: www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk

The Breastfeeding Network aims to be an independent source of support and information for breastfeeding women and others. It has a breastfeeding support line and breastfeeding support centres across the UK.

La Leche League GB

PO Box 29, West Bridgford,

Nottingham NG2 7NP

Office: 0845 456 1855

Breastfeeding helpline: 0845 120 2918

Website: www.laleche.org.uk

La Leche League GB is affiliated to La Leche League International, a voluntary organisation dedicated to providing education, information, support and encouragement to women who want to breastfeed. Services include a telephone helpline and local support groups for breastfeeding mothers.

NCT (The National Childbirth Trust)

Alexandra House, Oldham Terrace,
Acton, London W3 6NH

Enquiries: 0300 330 0770

Pregnancy and birth line: 0300 330 0772

Breastfeeding support line: 0300 330 0771

Website: www.nct.org.uk

Charity concerned with pregnancy, birth and parenting in the UK. Membership organisation with over 100,000 members. Includes a network of volunteers and branches who provide and support local services, training and evidence-based information for parents, families and health professionals. Has dedicated helplines for pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding enquiries. Also provides antenatal and postnatal classes.

NHS choices: breastfeeding and support

Website: www.nhs.uk/breastfeeding

UK association for milk banking

Website www.ukamb.org

Information on becoming a milk donor and on using donor milk.

UNICEF – The Baby Friendly Initiative

Website: www.babyfriendly.org.uk

The Baby Friendly Initiative is a worldwide programme of the World Health Organisation and UNICEF. It was launched in 1992 to encourage maternity hospitals to implement the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and to practise in accordance with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Produces information on breastfeeding.

Got a question about breast health?

As well as supporting people who have breast cancer we highlight the importance of early detection and can answer your questions about breast health and breast problems.

Ask us

You can call our free Helpline if you have a breast health or breast awareness query. Calls are answered by specialist nurses and trained staff. Or you can Ask the Nurse by email instead via our website.

Free Helpline **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay 18001)

Monday–Friday 9am–5pm

Saturday 10am–2pm

www.breastcancercare.org.uk/ATN

Expert information

Written and reviewed by healthcare professionals and reviewed by members of the public, our free booklets and other information resources cover a range of information on breast health, including leaflets on a number of benign (not cancer) breast problems.

Download or order information from our website or call the Helpline.

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

We're here for you: help us to be there for other people too

If you found this booklet helpful, please use this form to send us a donation. Our information resources and other services are only free because of support from people such as you.

We want to be there for every person facing the emotional and physical trauma of a breast cancer diagnosis. Donate today and together we can ensure that everyone affected by breast cancer has someone to turn to.

Donate by post

Please accept my donation of **£10/£20/my own choice of £**

I enclose a cheque/PO/CAF voucher made payable to
Breast Cancer Care

Donate online

You can give using a debit or credit card at
www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate

My details

Name _____

Address _____

_____ Postcode _____

Email address _____

We might occasionally want to send you more information about our services and activities

- Please tick if you're happy to receive email from us
- Please tick if you don't want to receive post from us

We won't pass on your details to any other organisation or third parties.

Please return this form to Breast Cancer Care, Freepost RRRKZ-ARZY-YCKG,
5-13 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0NS



About this booklet

Breast changes during and after pregnancy was written by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and members of the public.



**For a full list of the sources
we used to research it:**

Phone 0345 092 0808

Email publications@breastcancercare.org.uk



You can order or download more copies from
www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications



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format or audio CD version:**

Phone 0345 092 0808

Email publications@breastcancercare.org.uk





the breast cancer
support charity

Breast Cancer Care is the only UK-wide charity providing specialist support and tailored information for anyone affected by breast cancer.

Our clinical expertise and emotional support network help thousands of people find a way to live with, through and beyond breast cancer.

Visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our free Helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay 18001).

Central Office

Breast Cancer Care
5–13 Great Suffolk Street
London SE1 0NS
Phone: 0345 092 0800
Email: info@breastcancercare.org.uk

Centres

London and South East of England
Phone: 0345 077 1895
Email: src@breastcancercare.org.uk

East Midlands and the North of England
Phone: 0345 077 1893
Email: nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk

Wales, South West and Central England
Phone: 0345 077 1894
Email: cym@breastcancercare.org.uk

Scotland and Northern Ireland
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Email: sco@breastcancercare.org.uk