

"Stress makes mine itch like crazy!"

I'm great at keeping my feelings under wraps, but I just can't seem to hide them from my breasts. Whenever things get tough, my boobs itch like crazy—especially around the nipples, where I get these tiny red bumps. And any little thing can trigger it, like traffic, a parent-teacher conference or work deadlines.

When it strikes in public, I resort to my purse trick. I've got ten really good at holding my bag to my chest and moving it around just the right way so I can scratch without being noticed. (The right clasp is key!) And let's just say I've mastered a few clever hand gestures.

The itching seems to get worse in the cold weather. When I lived in Pennsylvania during the winter, I worked with my father, my husband and another woman in a small office. Of course, I never scratched in front of my dad, but when it was just the woman and my husband, I'd really go to town. The two of them would roll their eyes and say, "There she goes again!"

I've used cortisone and antibiotic creams, but they don't help much. I can't even wear my lace bras (they make the itching worse), so I've had to throw them all away! Lately, I've been experimenting with the "distraction" technique: As soon as I feel my breasts start to get itchy, I take a short break from what I'm doing or get some air, and the itching subsides a bit. But I have a suspicion it'll take more than a few breaths of fresh air to get me into a lace bra again!

Robin Gray, 39

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Stressed-breasts syndrome explained

If you've ever suspected your breasts of reacting strangely to stress, here's confirmation: "In about 9 or 10 patients who complain of breast pain, the diagnosis is a stress reaction," says Nancy Elliott, M.D., director of Montclair Breast Center in New Jersey. Running late, looming deadlines and "mommy mayhem" trigger the release of adrenaline, the fight-or-flight hormone, she explains. And over time, unchecked stress can deplete adrenaline, causing the body to overproduce estrogen. Unfortunately, excess estrogen promotes the formation of cysts and fibroids.

"Women who notice that their breasts change in response to stress should talk to their doctors about it, and keep in mind that relaxation techniques, like meditation or massage, can prevent or offset the changes," says Dr. Elliott. "When pain strikes, applying a heating pad can offer fast relief."

Snack away BREAST SORENESS with these miracle foods

Neal Barnard, M.D., author of *Foods That Fight Pain* (Three Rivers Press) explains how these dietary wonders work.

Avocados

This fruit is rich in vitamin B₆, which stimulates the production of dopamine, a brain chemical that blocks pain receptors. And the monounsaturated fats in avocado act to lower levels of estrogen, a breast-pain culprit. Dip chips in guacamole or add a slice to your sandwich in place of mayo.

Tofu

Soy-based products, like tofu, contain phytoestrogens, plant substances that suppress the body's estrogen production. Enjoy a bowl of miso soup, snack on soy nuts or simply sip a cup of soy milk when breasts become tender.

Chili peppers

These heat-packing peppers are high in capsaicin, an alkaloid that blocks the nerves' ability to receive pain signals. Add a dash or two of hot sauce to your tacos or sprinkle crushed red pepper on your pizza.

Ginger

This flavorful root acts as an anti-inflammatory and reduces pain as effectively as over-the-counter medications, says Dr. Barnard. "Use it right off your spice rack—to get the benefit, add a half-teaspoon to whatever you're preparing or just sprinkle it in water and drink."