Galactorrhea
(Breast Discharge)

Galactorrhea is when there is a milky nipple discharge. It is different from normal milk in nursing mothers. It usually comes from both nipples. Galactorrhea is not a disease but may be a symptom of a problem. It may continue for years after weaning. Galactorrhea is caused by the hormone prolactin, which stimulates milk production. If the breast discharge looks like pus, is bloody or if there is a lump present in the affected breast, the discharge may be caused by other problems including:

- A benign cyst.
- Papilloma.
- Breast cancer.
- A breast infection.
- A breast abscess.

It can also be seen in men who have a low or absent male hormone (*testosterone*) level. Galactorrhea can be present in a newborn if the mother had high female hormone (*estrogen*) levels that crossed into the baby through the placenta. The baby usually has enlarged breasts, but in time, it all goes away on its own.

CAUSES

- Tumor of the pituitary gland in the brain.
- Problems with the hypothalamus in the brain that stimulates the pituitary gland.
- Low thyroid function (*hypothyroid disease*).
- Chronic kidney failure.
- Medications, antidepressants, tranquilizers and blood pressure medication.
- Herbal medications (nettle, fennel, blessed thistle, anise and fenugreek seed).
- Illegal drugs (marijuana and opiates).
- Breast stimulation during sexual activity or too many and frequent self breast exams.
- Birth control pills.
- Surgery or trauma to the breast causing nerve damage.
- Spinal cord injury.

SYMPTOMS

- White, yellow or green discharge from one or both breasts.
- No menstrual period (*amenorrhea*) or infrequent menstrual periods (*hypomenorrhea*).
- Hot flashes, lack of sexual desire or vaginal dryness.
- Infertility in women and men.
- Headaches and vision problems.
- Decrease in calcium in your bones (developing osteopenia or osteoporosis).

DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver may be able to know your problem by taking a detailed history and physical exam of you. Tests that may be done, include:

- Blood tests to check for the prolactin hormone, your female and thyroid hormones and a pregnancy test.
- A detailed eye exam.
- Mammogram.
- X-rays, CT scan or MRI of breasts or your brain looking for a tumor.

TREATMENT

- Stopping medications that may be causing the galactorrhea.
- Treating low thyroid function with thyroid hormones.

- Medical or surgical (if necessary) treatment of a pituitary gland tumor.
- Medication to lower the prolactin hormone level when no cause can be found.
- Surgery as a last resort to remove the breasts ducts if the discharge persists with treatment and is a problem.
- Treatment may not be necessary if you are not bothered by the breast discharge.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Before seeing your caregiver, make a list of all your symptoms, medications, when the breast discharge started and questions you may have.
- Avoid breast stimulation during sexual activity.
- Perform breast self exam once a month.
- Avoid clothes that rub on your nipples.
- Use breasts pads to absorb the discharge.
- Wear a support bra.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have galactorrhea and you are trying to get pregnant.
- You develop hot flashes, vaginal dryness or lack of sexual desire.
- You stop having menstrual periods or they are irregular or far apart.
- You have headaches.
- You have vision problems.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your breast discharge is bloody or pus-like.
- You have breast pain.
- You feel a lump in your breast.
- Your breast shows wrinkling or dimpling.
- Your breast becomes red and swollen.

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