

What is Paget disease of the breast?

Paget disease of the breast (also called Paget disease of the nipple) is a rare cancer that forms in the skin closely surrounding the nipple. It is usually, but not always, found with an underlying breast cancer such as invasive breast cancer or a non-invasive breast cancer called ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS).

About 1 to 3 percent of all breast cancers are Paget disease of the breast. It can occur in both men and women.



Photo Courtesy of Dr. Marilyn Leitch, Department of Surgery, UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

How does Paget disease of the breast develop?

Although the exact way Paget disease of the breast develops is unclear, there are a couple theories:

- When an underlying breast cancer is present, cells may break off from the cancer inside the breast and move through the milk ducts to the nipple. The tumor then grows from underneath the nipple and breaks out onto the skin surface of the nipple.
- When an underlying breast cancer is not present, cells at the end of the milk duct in the nipple or skin cells of the nipple become cancerous.

Warning signs

- Itching, burning, redness and scaling of the skin on the nipple and areola (the more darkly shaded circle of skin around the nipple)
- Bleeding or oozing from the nipple
- Nipple may appear flattened against the breast
- There may also be a lump in the breast

Diagnosis

Paget disease of the breast is often mistaken for eczema. Eczema is an itchy, red skin rash. It is not cancer. Although Paget disease and eczema can look alike, Paget disease most often affects only one nipple and doesn't go away after using common eczema treatments.

Paget disease of the breast can be diagnosed from a biopsy of the nipple skin and the tissue just below the skin (sometimes called a punch biopsy). A clinical breast exam and a mammogram may be done to check for breast cancer elsewhere in the breast.

Paget disease of the breast also may be found when an underlying breast cancer is diagnosed.

How is Paget disease of the breast treated?

The treatment for Paget disease of the breast depends on the underlying breast cancer. Treatment includes surgery (mastectomy or lumpectomy) and some combination of radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy.

Prognosis (chances for survival) for Paget disease of the breast is good if it stays within the nipple and milk ducts. Prognosis is lower if the cancer has spread to other parts of the breast or body.

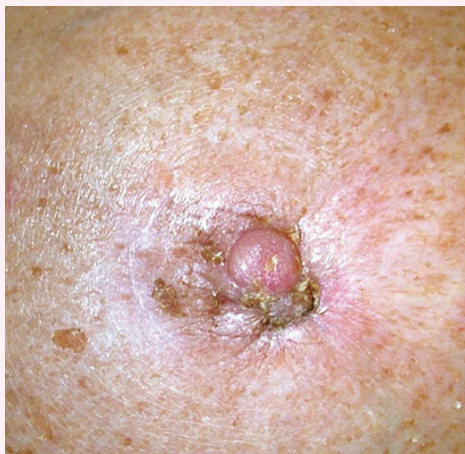


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Resources

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute (NCI)
NCI Fact Sheet – Paget Disease of the Breast
1-800-4-CANCER
www.cancer.gov

Related fact sheets in this series:

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