

Vasospasm

 ibconline.ca/information-sheets/vasospasm

Vasospasm describes a situation when blood vessels contract abnormally resulting in impaired blood flow to an area. People with Raynaud's Phenomenon (often associated with "auto-immune" illnesses such as rheumatoid arthritis) may have vasospasm that will occur in the fingers when going outside from a warm house on a cool day. The fingers will turn white and the lack of blood getting to the tips of the fingers will cause pain.

Vasospasm of the nipples can occur occasionally during pregnancy and not infrequently with breastfeeding and can cause pain in the nipples and/or breasts. See also the information sheet "[Sore Nipples](#)". Note, vasospasm pain in the breast is sometimes referred to as Mammary Constriction Syndrome (MCS), a related condition that is treated similarly.

Symptoms of vasospasm in breastfeeding:

- Burning, stabbing, throbbing, and/or "pins and needles" pain in the nipple and/or in the breast once the baby is off the breast.
 - Pain may also occur when stepping out of a warm shower or when going outside on a cold day.
 - There may or may not be pain during breastfeeding.
- Nipples may change colour (red, white, or purple) and go back and forth between colours (e.g. white to pink, back to white) for several minutes or even an hour or two.
 - See [a video](#) of colour changes in the nipple.
 - **Note:** colour changes on their own (without pain) are not a concern.
- Because of a lack of blood flow to the nipple, healing of nipple damage/wounds may be delayed.

Causes of vasospasm:

Any cause of nipple pain, like a less than adequate latch or pulling at the breast (as in decreased milk flow), can be associated with vasospasm.

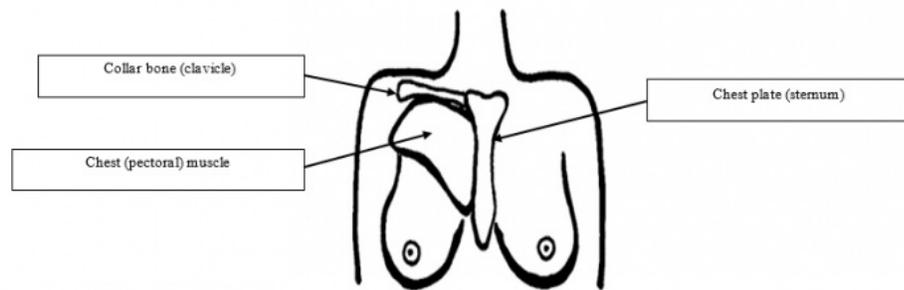
Treatment of vasospasm:

Note: vasospasm is often diagnosed as yeast because some of the symptoms are similar. We recommend trying the suggestions below before trying treatments for yeast.

1. Improve the latch. See information sheet "[Latching and Feeding Management](#)".
2. Air-drying the nipples, often recommended for other causes of sore nipples, may actually increase vasospasm because of the cool air. Keep the nipples/breasts warm. Exposing the nipple to cooler air after it has been inside the baby's warm mouth often triggers vasospasm. When baby comes off the breast, immediately cover the nipple with your

warm hand while you get your bra done up. After taking a shower, wrap a towel around your breasts before stepping out of the shower enclosure. Wool breast pads keep the nipples warmer than regular cotton or disposable pads. You can also apply dry heat to nipples/breasts by using a heating pad or hot water bottle over your clothes.

3. All Purpose Nipple Ointment or olive oil. If using the All Purpose Nipple Ointment, warm a small amount between your fingers, reach inside your bra and squeeze and massage the areola. The same can be done with plain olive oil as an alternative.
4. Pectoral muscle massage. Massage the chest muscles below the collarbone and above the breasts after the feedings or at the onset of nipple or breast pain. The massage should be very vigorous and firm and should be done for 60 seconds on each side. You can also massage under or between the breasts or in her armpits, but this massage should be done gently.



5. Stretching. If there is pain in the breast, stretching the muscles around the breast throughout the day can help keep blood flowing more easily. Lift one arm to shoulder height or slightly lower and press it back/behind you. Hold the stretch while taking a couple of deep breaths. Do the stretch twice with each arm – once with your palm facing forward and once with it facing back. Use the photos below as a guide.



If there is no improvement:

6. Vitamin B6 in a B vitamin complex. Vitamin B6 seems to work best for vasospasm when it is taken as part of a B complex of vitamins that includes niacin. Take 100 mg of B6, in the complex, twice a day. The amount of B6 in each capsule will be listed on the bottle's label. So, for example, if the overall capsule is 125 mg of B complex and there is only 50 mg of B6 in that capsule, then you would need to take two capsules, two times a day. If there is no significant improvement within one week, stop the B complex. If the B complex decreases the pain, continue taking it until your pain has been stable (or you have been pain-free) for 2 weeks, and then stop.
7. Magnesium can help relax muscles and blood vessels. A magnesium supplement can be especially helpful if there is vasospasm pain in the breasts. Take 250 to 300 mg of magnesium, twice a day. There are different forms of magnesium available as supplements – look for magnesium bisglycinate or magnesium citrate, as they are better absorbed and less likely to cause loose stool than others. If there is no significant improvement within 3 to 4 weeks, stop the magnesium supplement. If the magnesium decreases the pain, continue taking it until your pain has been stable (or you have been pain-free) for 2 weeks, and then stop.

If there is still no improvement:

8. Nifedipine (or other medication which causes relaxation of blood vessels). Nifedipine is a prescription drug used for high blood pressure. One 30 mg tablet of the *slow release* formulation once a day often takes away the pain of After two weeks, stop the medication. If pain returns (about 10% of the time), start it again. After two more weeks, stop the medication. If pain returns (which is uncommon), start it again. No more than three, two-week courses should be needed although some have needed it for a longer period of time. Side effects are uncommon, but headache is not rare. The dose can be increased if 1 tablet is insufficient ([contact us](#) for more information). Nifedipine may be used in conjunction with all of the other treatments listed above.

The information presented here is general and not a substitute for personalized treatment from an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) or other qualified medical professionals.

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Questions or concerns? [Email Dr. Jack Newman](#) (read the page carefully, and answer the listed questions).

[Make an appointment at the Newman Breastfeeding Clinic.](#)