Cysts
Fluid-filled sacs commonly in the breast

Cysts are fluid-filled sacs that occur commonly in the breast. They are usually ovoid or round and vary in size. They are formed when the ducts become blocked and the fluid becomes trapped. Breast cysts are extremely common, with some women developing many and others producing one or a few. Cysts are not cancer and do not become cancer.

Depending on their size and location, larger cysts can be felt (palpated). They are usually soft, rubbery, and mobile. Many smaller cysts are not palpated, but may be seen on a mammogram. While some women are producers of cysts, other factors may affect their production including caffeine intake and hormone therapy. Cysts can become uncomfortable, even painful, and may increase and decrease with a woman’s menstrual cycle. They may spontaneously resolve on their own.

If it is suspected that you have a cyst, a breast ultrasound may be recommended. This will differentiate a fluid-filled cyst from a solid lesion. Depending on size and features recognized on the ultrasound, it may be necessary to aspirate the cyst. This means a radiologist (a medical doctor specialized in interpreting x-rays) or surgeon would insert a fine needle into the lesion and withdraw the fluid, collapsing the walls. Aspiration is also indicated if the cyst is very palpable and painful. Depending on the color and/or thickness of the fluid, it may be sent to be evaluated by a pathologist, similar to doing a pap smear.

Although cysts often resolve on their own, it is not unusual for women to develop new cysts. For this reason, it is important for women to monitor their breasts by practicing monthly breast self-examination and having regular mammograms as recommended by their primary care physician and radiologist. Some women may wish to be monitored by a breast surgeon. Always report any changes to your doctor.