

Breast Enlargement in Boys (Gynecomastia)

Enlargement of the breasts, sometimes called gynecomastia, is relatively common in boys. It can be an embarrassing problem during adolescence, when boys may be self-conscious about their bodies. Most cases are caused by normal hormones produced during puberty, although other causes are possible. Usually the breasts return to normal size without any special treatment.

What is gynecomastia?

Enlargement of the breast in boys or men is called gynecomastia. A number of different diseases can cause the male breast to grow larger. This can also be caused by exposure to the hormone estrogen or certain drugs.

Most often, however, breast enlargement is a temporary response to hormonal changes occurring around puberty. In most cases, the breasts eventually return to normal size. This is called physiologic pubertal gynecomastia, and no treatment is needed. Treatment is possible, however, if gynecomastia is causing severe emotional distress.

Boys who are overweight or obese may appear to have enlarged breasts. However, this is not the same as gynecomastia but is caused by excessive body fat. For these boys, losing weight is the best way to reduce breast size.

What does it look like?

- One or both breasts become enlarged and sometimes tender. Breast tissue may develop at different rates or different times.
- The enlargement appears as an area of firm breast tissue located under the nipple. It is not the same as the soft, fatty tissue that can make the breasts seem enlarged in boys who are overweight or obese.
- The breasts may be tender; this is usually temporary.
- In most cases, the breasts gradually return to normal. This may take a few months or may take as long as up to 2 years.

What causes gynecomastia?

- Pubertal gynecomastia. Most often, breast enlargement is caused by hormone changes in your son's body around puberty. As many as two thirds of boys have at least mild breast enlargement and/or tenderness sometime during early to middle puberty.
- Many other causes are possible but much less common:

- Exposure to the hormone estrogen.
- Exposure to other drugs, including certain antacids, diuretics ("water pills"), and heart medications.
- Drug abuse, including marijuana and heroin.
- Certain genetic diseases (such as Klinefelter's syndrome).
- Various gland and hormonal diseases, including tumors of the adrenal glands or testicles and hyperthyroidism (overproduction of hormones by the thyroid gland).

What are some possible complications of gynecomastia?

- Usually none. In most cases, the condition clears up on its own.
- For some boys, breast enlargement is an embarrassing problem. Treatment is available if needed.

How is gynecomastia treated?

- Usually, boys with breast enlargement around the time of puberty require no treatment. The condition is normal and temporary.
- In most cases, breast enlargement goes away on its own within a few months. However, in some children it may take up to 2 years for the problem to go away completely.
- For boys who are overweight or obese, apparent breast enlargement is usually related to fatty tissue, not to hormone-related enlargement. Weight loss through diet and exercise is the best way to reduce breast size.
- Some boys with gynecomastia are very embarrassed about this problem. If your son is experiencing serious emotional issues related to breast enlargement, we may recommend seeing a counselor.
- Because the enlarged breasts generally return to normal or become significantly smaller, surgery is rarely recommended.
- If the cause is estrogen exposure or drug use, the breasts should return to normal once exposure to these substances is eliminated.
- If the cause is a genetic or hormonal disorder, we will recommend a visit to an appropriate specialist.

When should I call your office?

After evaluation for gynecomastia, the doctor may want to re-examine your son every 6 months, just to be sure no other problems are present. Between visits, call our office if:

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- Breast size continues to increase.
- You have any concerns about your child's possible drug abuse or accidental drug exposure, for example, smoking marijuana or exposure to even small amounts of estrogen.
- Your son is experiencing severe embarrassment or emotional distress that is interfering with other areas of his life.