



Nipple Vasospasm

What is Vasospasm?

Vasospasm is a condition in which the nipples turn white and are painful after breastfeeding. It can also happen when the mother is cold, such as during or after showering, when shopping in the freezer section of the grocery store or when entering an air-conditioned room. While we usually see this in breastfeeding women, it can also happen during pregnancy and in women who are not pregnant.

The pain may last from a few minutes to several hours. It is usually described as a burning of the nipples. Some women have reported a throbbing or aching pain in the breast and through to the shoulder blade. The pain generally stops soon after the nipples return to their normal pink colour.

What causes vasospasm?

The nipples turn pale because the blood vessels that feed the nipple clamp down. This results in a temporary lack of blood flow to the nipple. The lack of oxygen in the nipple causes pain. When the blood vessels open up, allowing blood to again flow into the nipple, it turns pink again and the pain gradually stops. Some women with more severe vasospasm will see the nipple going from pink to white to purple to dark red and then finally back to pink.

Usually, women who have vasospasm also have something else irritating the nipples: yeast infection, damage, or trauma of some kind. Once this "something else" is eliminated, the vasospasm usually fades away. There is no evidence that vasospasm is caused by the baby clamping down too tightly at the breast while nursing.

Will having vasospasm damage my nipples?

While vasospasm can be painful, we have never seen it cause damage to the nipples.



How is vasospasm treated?

Many women with vasospasm are able to control the pain. There are several ways of treating and of preventing vasospasm.

Vasospasm can be treated by massaging the areolae and applying pressure and/or warmth to the nipples after feedings.

Most mothers find massaging the areola will quickly get the nipple back to pink. To do this, place your index finger and thumb on opposite sides of the areola about 1 centimeter (nearly 1/2 inch) away from the nipple. Then pinch together slightly and roll the fingers gently back and forth until the pink colour returns and the pain stops. Some women massage the front of the affected nipple.

If you are out in public, pressure can be applied to the nipple with your hand or with your forearm.

Warmth can be applied to the nipples with your hand, a heating pad or a hot water bottle. Some mothers use rice socks. This consists of a baby's sock filled with rice and sewn closed. These are microwaved to create a warm pad that can be placed in a bra. Wearing warm flannelette breast pads may help as well. In some cases, simply doing up the bra flap immediately after nursing instead of allowing the nipple to air-dry may be all that is needed. At night, sleeping on your stomach and wearing warm bed clothes may help.

Keeping warm during feedings can help prevent vasospasm. Some ways to keep warm during feeding include: staying out of drafts, placing a shawl or blanket around your shoulders or placing a heating pad behind your back. One woman found placing her feet in a pan of warm water during breastfeeding to be helpful.

Are there any other types of spasm that can bother the nipple?

Some mothers note that instead of the nipple going white after feeds, the nipple can stay pink but go very hard. This too causes a burning pain in the nipple and an aching pain in the breast and back. This is also brought on by the nipple being irritated and is treated in the same way as vasospasm. A very small number of mothers can have spasm of the areola. The treatment and prevention are similar to vasospasm.