

Milk Blebs and Plugged Ducts

What is a Plugged Duct?

A plugged duct is a duct that is not draining properly. It can be felt as a round lump in the breast. The size is between a marble and 1/3 of the breast. It usually comes on fairly quickly. Some are only a little tender but others can be very tender. There is no warmth in or redness on the breast. Mothers with a plugged duct feel well and don't have a fever.

What is a milk bleb?

A milk bleb (also known as a milk pimple) is a small, white, raised pimple on the tip of the nipple. It is caused by milk fat separating and creating a plug in the duct. The fat cannot get out through the nipple and creates a bleb. These are usually very tender. Often mothers can have a plugged duct for one or a few days before the bleb is present. Usually mothers will have only one bleb at a time but we have seen more than one bleb on a nipple as well as mothers with one on both nipples at once.

Plugged ducts and milk blebs can occur independently. If mothers have both, the plug usually develops before the bleb.

What is the treatment for a milk bleb?

If the bleb is new it can usually be opened. Some mothers will pick off the top layer of skin with a (clean) fingernail. Others will sterilize a needle and use this to prick open the bleb. This is often all that is needed to release the accumulated milk. Sometimes blebs need to have the fat plug massaged out of the nipple. The fat can appear as a grain of sand, cheese or a string. Apply an ointment like modified lanolin to the site after each feeding until it is healed.

If the bleb is older the skin will appear yellow and thickened. A medicated ointment may be needed to thin the skin before the bleb can be opened. Sometimes an antibiotic ointment is needed, as well.



What is the treatment for a plugged duct?

If there is a milk bleb covering the duct, it may have to be removed before the milk can flow.

A plugged duct can be softened by massaging the breast after breastfeeding with a firm stroke beginning behind the plug, along the length of the plug and then on toward the nipple. This helps push the extra milk out the nipple. Sometimes the milk is thick or stringy at first; this is normal. It is best to use cooking oil on the hands to help massaging.

How can I prevent milk blebs and plugged ducts?

There may be a link between high levels of dietary saturated fats and plugged ducts and milk blebs. Saturated fats are solid at room temperature. Examples are lard, margarine, palm oil, meat fat and dairy fat. Try reducing saturated fats in your diet. Other mothers have found taking lecithin useful. This is a fat that helps keep water and fat mixed. It is used in ice cream and gravy. Lecithin can be found in health food stores and is available as granules and in capsules.

Restrictive clothing and missing feedings can contribute to plugged ducts. If you are having repeated plugged ducts, check for these.