

Here's Help for
**Nursing
Moms***



End mastitis misery, with homeopathy and natural medicine

By Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP

When I first met Perla, she was sitting in my office with tears streaming down her cheeks and nursing her four-month-old baby. Although she had breastfed her two earlier children with ease, this time she was struggling with repeated bouts of excruciating mastitis—inflammation of the breast, which often involves blocked milk ducts or infection. Now, several months into mastitis misery, Perla felt she had tried everything to help herself but to no avail. While many women would have given up, she was determined to continue nursing her baby, though it came at enormous personal cost. Thankfully, homeopathy was able to help her—more on that later.

Nationwide formula shortage

A crisis gripped the nation recently when infant formula suddenly became hard to find. Abbot Nutrition, producer of half the formula in the U.S., closed its plant in February 2022. This, compounded by pandemic supply chain issues, resulted in bare store shelves and panicked parents. Since more than half of U.S. babies rely on infant formula in their first six months of life, millions of parents were scrambling—nervous and uncertain about how they would be able to feed their children. The government eventually stepped in to ease the pressure with an influx of formula from overseas, but by year-end, the market has not fully recovered.

Breast is best?

The formula shortage was also an opportunity for breastfeeding advocates to rally around the importance of nursing. Indeed, breastfeeding is a wonderful, nutritious, effective way to nourish a baby, and it is healthy for the baby and the mother/baby relationship. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that babies be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and supports continued breastfeeding up to two years and beyond.

Context counts

While many women have lovely, successful nursing experiences, especially when they get early education, encouragement, and

support, that's not true for everyone. To keep their jobs, many women must return to work just two to six weeks after giving birth. Federal law requiring 12 weeks of unpaid family leave applies only to employers with more than 50 workers—which covers less than half the workforce. Breastfeeding mothers often return to a job site that is hostile to their needs, offering little or no private space and time to nurse or pump milk. With such lack of support, it's no wonder many women stop or never start nursing.

Parents may choose formula over breastfeeding (or as a supplement to breast milk) for a myriad of other reasons that make sense in the context of their situations. Each parent-child relationship is unique, as is each family situation. While I encourage nursing or pumping milk for at least three to six months if possible, I pass no judgement on those who do not nurse. Commercial and homemade formulae nourish a child well, too. Many of us who were never nursed seem to be doing just fine.

Natural medicine can help

Mastitis is another challenge for many nursing women, as we saw with Perla, and it is one of the most *common* reasons that women quit nursing. This condition is often treated with antibiotics, but natural medicine and homeopathy can go a long way to prevent and treat it. Overprescribing antibiotics is leading to antibiotic-resistant infections across the world, so we should sidestep antibiotics whenever we can. In addition, antibiotics affect the microbiomes of the mother and baby, which can impact everything from digestion to immune function to cognition to mood.

More on mastitis

Mastitis is most common in the first six to twelve weeks of breastfeeding (although it can also affect non-nursing women and men). Typical symptoms include:

- Breast tenderness or sensation of warmth
- Swelling of the breast
- Thickening of tissue, or lumps or bumps in the breast

- Pain while breastfeeding, or pain in the breast at all times
- Redness of the breast
- Feeling ill overall
- Fever.

Things that make mastitis more likely include: breasts engorged with milk, cracks in and around the nipple where infection can enter, poor-fitting bra, excessive stress, smoking, inadequate sleep, and tapering off from breastfeeding. For my go-to naturopathic approaches to prevent and treat mastitis, see *Help Mastitis Naturally* below.

Perla's pain

Let's get back to Perla, who was struggling with painful mastitis. As she sat in my office weeping and telling her story, I learned that in addition to the four-month-old son she was nursing, she had a four-year-old son. Between these two sons, she had given birth to a daughter, but, sadly, the girl died of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) at 12 months old.

Perla had not intended to become pregnant so soon after losing her daughter. But she felt "the universe was listening," and said she was happy to have her new baby boy, even while grief for her daughter was all-encompassing.

Perla had breastfed each of her first two children exclusively and without issue for nearly a year. But this new baby boy was a different story with Perla having one bout of mastitis after another. The pain was intense and sharp, especially when her son was at the breast. Her nipples were cracked, and she could not get them to heal, no matter what she tried.

As Perla continued to tell her story, it was hard to know whether her tears were from pain or sorrow, or more likely, both. But she professed determination to continue nursing her son.

Trial and error

Perla had already tried some homeopathic remedies on another homeopath's recommendation: *Castor equorum*, which fit the cracked, ulcerated nipples; *Phytolacca*, which matched the pain radiating from the nipple to the entire breast, and palpable knots within the breast and armpit; and *Pulsatilla*, which fit her sore, tender breasts *throughout* pregnancy, as well as her warm-blooded nature and constant weeping.

Unfortunately, none of these remedies had helped. I believe they had missed the mark because they focused too narrowly, primarily on her breast symptoms, instead of aiming more broadly at the whole person and the tragedy her family experienced.

A broader view

Given the breadth and depth of Perla's grief, I knew that grief would greatly factor into my understanding of the physical condition that brought her to my clinic and, therefore, the remedy chosen. Indeed, with further conversation and clarification, I learned that Perla was pregnant nearly the entire first

year of mourning for her daughter. She admitted to not feeling bonded to this new baby boy; she was filled with sadness, deep-seated irritability, anger, and even rage. So, while Perla intellectually wanted this new baby, she was having a hard time with the reality.

In reviewing the rest of Perla's history, I learned that she enjoyed excellent health, ate well, and exercised fairly regularly. She tended to get a scratchy throat if she was run-down. Aside from that as well as her sadness, mastitis, and cracked nipples, she was a healthy 38-year-old.

Two possibilities

In choosing a remedy for Perla, I considered two—*Causticum* and *Ignatia*. People needing these remedies typically have high ideals about how people, organizations, and the world should work. They become disappointed or grief-stricken when the world and those around them do not meet these ideals, and their physical health may suffer as a result. "This is just not

Help Mastitis,

PREVENTION

Here are my go-to approaches for the nursing mother to prevent mastitis:

1. Ensure a proper-fitting bra, as an ill-fitting one that compresses breast tissue can lead to clogged ducts and reduced milk supply.
2. Stay well hydrated. Drink about half your body weight in ounces of water a day. Diluted juices, non-caffeinated tea, and sparkling water count.
3. Have help and support with the baby and the household, as needed, either enlisting family and friends or hiring help. Forget trying to do it all yourself!
4. Ensure adequate and healthy nutrition. It takes more calories to make milk than to sustain a pregnancy. This is not a time for weight loss efforts.
5. Confer with a lactation consultant early and often, to be sure that your baby latches on well and that the breast is emptying with each feeding. Learn different nursing positions that work better for you and your baby.
6. Work toward having a robust and diverse microbiome. Include fermented or cultured food in your diet. Consider supplementing with a probiotic, especially if antibiotics were taken before or after the birth. Focus on high fiber from whole grains and fruits and vegetables, too, as they provide prebiotic material for the probiotics to work on.

how the world is supposed to work!” said Perla in describing her heart-wrenching loss.

People needing *Causticum* get fired up and try to fix things, joining efforts to create change in the world; *Ignatia* types get angry and try to fix things, too, but their focus is more often on family, friends, and relationships, which seemed more in line with Perla’s reactions and focus.

People needing these two remedies have a tendency to develop cracks here and there, especially in the skin (e.g., Perla’s painful, cracked nipples) and where mucous membranes meet the skin.

People needing either of these remedies can be a bit twitchy in their muscles, when stressed or in pain, as Perla was. *Causticum* pain tends to feel neurologic, zingy, or numb, while *Ignatia* pain tends to feel stabbing and intense. Perla’s pain fit *Ignatia* better, as it was sharp, stabbing, and intense whenever the baby was at her breast.

Another characteristic I noted about Perla was that she frequently acted in a contradictory manner. For example, when her baby was crying, she put him down. When he was calm, she picked him up. Even though she was in excruciating pain, she wanted to keep nursing when most people would have given up long ago! When Perla had a scratchy throat, she craved hard food such as crackers and popcorn, while most people would choose more soothing options. People needing *Ignatia* often have such contradictions in their story, which confirmed my choice of *Ignatia* for her.

A weight lifts

Perla took one dose of *Ignatia* 200c. I also shared my list of natural medicine approaches with her, most of which she’d already tried. (See *Help Mastitis Naturally* below.)

Within a week, Perla’s nipples were no longer cracked. She could nurse her son without pain, which was a great relief. “I felt an immediate weight lift off me when I took that remedy,”

Naturally

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TREATMENT

Here are my go-to natural medicine approaches to treat mastitis:

1. Nurse regularly to prevent further engorgement. It may seem counterintuitive, but the baby’s hard sucking in the earliest part of feeding can help dislodge duct areas that are blocked. Even if you have mastitis, rest assured that you can continue to nurse, as your milk is still good for your baby.
2. Stand in a hot shower for 15 to 20 minutes or use warm compresses on the breasts; this can help soften hardened areas and keep the milk flowing.
3. Cold cabbage leaves are a tried-and-true home remedy. Cut a cool cabbage leaf to fit the breast, insert it in the bra or undershirt, leaving the nipple area free. Use for 10 to 15 minutes, two or three times a day. (Avoid using cabbage leaves more frequently, as this could actually dry the milk supply—something to remember for weaning time.)
4. Gently massage the affected breast in the direction of the nipple, especially in a hot shower.
5. Keep well hydrated—water, sparkling water, teas, soups, and other liquids.
6. Use gentle natural medicines for immune support, such as Vitamin C, zinc, and elderberry.
7. If you have recurring clogged ducts, consider supplementing with soy lecithin and fish oil.



she reported. She felt more connected to her baby and “like it’s okay now to feel some joy,” she said, though, of course, she continued to miss her lost child. Over the 14 months Perla nursed her son, she had no further episodes of mastitis.

Homeopathy helped Perla’s mastitis and her comfort in breastfeeding, yes, but it also helped her emotional capacity to bond with her baby and embrace the family she had. As a mother myself, it is hard to imagine any grief worse than losing a child. Yet, Perla had two other children who needed

her love and attention, and I believe *Ignatia* helped her to be the mother she wanted to be.

At later intervals, Perla benefited from additional doses of *Ignatia*, usually at stressful times when waves of grief and loss returned, but that happened less and less frequently over time. I have seen Perla and her family now for more than 20 years, and they continue to honor the memory of the daughter they lost, while fully embracing the two sons who are now young adults.

Self-Help: Top 4 Remedies

When you’re sick and suffering, it’s hard to choose a remedy for yourself, let alone be objective. That’s why it’s wise to have a trained homeopathy professional in your corner—someone with knowledge and expertise to choose the most appropriate remedy for you and your whole situation, and to monitor and advise you when it may be time to seek additional help. But if you’re in a pinch, here are four of the top remedies to consider for mastitis during breastfeeding.

Belladonna

Mastitis comes on suddenly. Breast feels hot, inflamed, swollen, and heavy. Pain may be pulsating or throbbing. Breast may be red or have red streaks radiating from the center. Person may be feverish and flushed, with a throbbing headache and no thirst. Right breast may be affected more than left. *Belladonna* is used most often in early stages of inflammation.

Bryonia

Pain that is worse from the slightest motion may call for *Bryonia*. Breasts feel heavy and stony hard, requiring the person to hold their breasts when walking or moving. Breasts are hot and swollen but not very red. Pain feels stitching or dragging, extending from nipple to shoulder blade, especially when infant begins to nurse. Resting and keeping still offers relief. Person might be irritable, thirsty for cold drinks, and have a stitching headache.

Castor equi

Nipples are extremely sore, painful, cracked, or ulcerated from nursing. They may be dry and surrounded by redness. The touch of clothing is unbearable because of extreme tenderness. Internal itching of the breast leads to rubbing and scratching. The breasts feel swollen and more painful when the person descends stairs.

Phytolacca

This is the most commonly used remedy for mastitis. Breasts are heavy, stony hard, swollen, and tender, with painful nodules or lumps. Breasts may have a purplish hue. Extreme pain occurs while nursing, radiating from the breast to the whole body, making the person sore all over. Nipples may be cracked, sore, sensitive, and inverted. Lymph glands in the armpit may be swollen.



PHYTOLACCA EXPERIENCES

“In my experience, the best cure for a breast infection is a hungry baby and a dose of *Phytolacca decandra*. This remedy, made from poke root, cures the majority of breast infections, and I’ve seen it work countless times.”

— Maesimund Panos, MD, in *Homeopathic Medicine at Home*

“I have seen *Phytolacca* work in many cases of initial mastitis, and sometimes even in progressed cases. During our immigration from Russia, my wife, my daughters, and I were housed in Ladispoli, Italy. One of the families in our group had a very young child whose breast-feeding mother had to attend many different interviews and apparently hadn’t been able to pump too well beforehand. As a result, she developed a severe case of mastitis, with breast tenderness, redness, pain, and fever. The problem emerged during the weekend, when there was no access to medical care. I had *Phytolacca* 6X in my bags and offered it to the woman. Remedies at this concentration have to be taken at least three times a day. In less than 24 hours, the swelling and tenderness went down, and in another day the episode was over.”

— Edward Shalts, MD, DHT, in *The American Institute of Homeopathy Handbook for Parents*.

Compiled by Homeopathy Today staff

Carianne's sudden pain and fever

A long-time patient of mine, Carianne, came to see me for mastitis that cropped up seemingly overnight. She had been doing beautifully those first wonderful weeks after her home birth of a robust baby girl. Mother and baby had bonded well, and nursing was going smoothly. Then Carianne woke up one morning with her right breast “killing” her. The pain was aching; the breast was red, hot, hard, and tender to touch. She had a low-grade fever and felt “fluey.” She also had a pounding headache, something she was not accustomed to.

Constitutional or acute remedy?

In choosing a remedy for Carianne, I first considered whether she might benefit from another dose of her constitutional remedy, *Calcarea carbonica*, which had helped her in the past. It had fit her tendencies to be organized, responsible, anxious about her health, chilly, and constipated.

Since having mastitis, however, Carianne was feeling decidedly hot rather than her usual chilly. And although the mastitis bothered her, she was uncharacteristically calm about it. These two shifts in her general tendencies—from chilly to hot, and from anxious to feeling sick *without* anxiety—let me know that she probably did not need her constitutional remedy after all.

Focusing on new, acute symptoms

I set out to find a different remedy—one that fit Carianne's sudden onset of symptoms with red, hot, throbbing pain. The top remedy was *Belladonna*, and her pounding headache fit the picture, too. *Lachesis* also came to mind because it is known for lots of heat and throbbing pain in acute conditions, too; but if she needed this remedy, I would expect to see a more aggressive demeanor and a more blue-ish hue to her infection.

In fact, we often see people with a *Calcarea carbonica* constitution “go into” a *Belladonna* state during an acute illness. Similarly, we may see a constitutional *Natrum muriaticum* person “go into” a *Bryonia* state during an acute illness, and a constitutional *Sulphur* person “go into” an *Arsenicum album* state of acute illness. This highlights some of the many relationships among and between remedies; these relationships are not hard and fast, but I consider them when selecting a remedy for a patient.

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Homeopathy: Great for dairy herd mastitis too!

As an aside: I'll never forget when we were asked by a patient to treat the family's herd of dairy cattle. The farmer was desperate, as the cows were having mastitis in near-epidemic proportions, not a welcome sign in a dairy herd. We wound up treating the entire herd using a *genus epidemicus* remedy (one homeopathic remedy selected for the entire herd and its most prominent symptoms).

Instead of dosing each animal, we had the farmer put the remedy in the water trough, which would treat all the cows at once and hopefully stem the spread of illness. We chose *Sepia* because it fit the herd's mastitis with deeply cracked skin as well as chronic vaginal discharge. (To view research about the use of homeopathy for dairy herd mastitis, visit HomeopathyCenter.org/quotable-research-library.)

It worked! To the farmer's delight, the affected cows' mastitis and discharge resolved without needing to resort to giving them antibiotics. And no new cases arose either.

Quick relief

I asked Carianne to take one dose of *Belladonna* 30c, repeated three times over the course of the day. Within hours, she felt her throbbing headache begin to dissipate along with the mastitis pain, and her symptoms resolved within the next day. We then set our sights on a better-fitting bra and another visit with the lactation consultant to be sure positioning and latching were optimized. That was Carianne's first and only bout of mastitis, and she weaned her child at 10 months, happy to have nursed that long.

Supporting parents

When we have the chance to support nursing parents, we should, as there are so many ways to help. Homeopathy and other natural medicine are powerful tools to help welcome little ones into this world and to help support healthy and happy families. 💧

* Although this article frequently uses gendered language related to breastfeeding women, the information also applies to breastfeeding trans men, trans women, and non-binary individuals. For more resources, please see “Support for Trans-Gender and Non-Binary Parents” on the La Leche League International website: <https://www.llli.org/breastfeeding-info/transgender-non-binary-parents/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP, has been in practice since 1986 in Northampton, MA, www.nhcmcd.com. Her new book, *You Finished Treatment, Now What? A Field Guide for Cancer Survivors* (Koehler Books, 2022) can be ordered anywhere books are sold. See www.DrAmyRothenberg.com. With her partner Paul Herscu, ND, MPH, DHANP, she founded and teaches through the New England School of Homeopathy, www.nesh.com. Her writing can be found at *Medium*, *Thrive Global*, *The Huff Po*, and more. When not working, Dr. Rothenberg enjoys spending time with her family, in the garden, and on the ballroom dance floor.