

Breast implant illness

What is known, what is not, and what to do if you have symptoms

In short: Breast implant illness (BII) is a name for a range of whole-body symptoms that some women with breast implants experience and believe are caused by them. It is not a formal diagnosis. No test confirms it, and the cause is not proven. The symptoms are real, other causes can be checked for, and many women who choose to have their implants removed report feeling better.

WHAT IS BREAST IMPLANT ILLNESS?

The term came from patients rather than doctors; researchers increasingly use *systemic symptoms associated with breast implants*. It has been reported with silicone and saline, smooth and textured implants. No one can predict who will be affected, and there is no reliable figure for how common it is.

SYMPTOMS WOMEN REPORT

No single symptom defines it, and many are common in people without implants, so other causes need ruling out.

SYMPTOM GROUP	EXAMPLES REPORTED	OTHER CAUSES TO CHECK FOR
Energy and thinking	Fatigue, brain fog, poor memory and concentration	Iron or vitamin B12 deficiency, thyroid disease, sleep problems
Joints and muscles	Joint pain, muscle aches, stiffness	Autoimmune arthritis, fibromyalgia, vitamin D deficiency
Skin and hair	Rashes, hair thinning, dry skin	Thyroid disease, iron deficiency, hormonal change
Mood and sleep	Anxiety, low mood, poor sleep	Depression, anxiety, perimenopause, stress
Other	Headaches, palpitations, gut upset, dry eyes or mouth	Migraine, thyroid disease, coeliac disease

SWELLING OF ONE BREAST IS DIFFERENT

Swelling of one breast that develops a year or more after surgery, or a new lump in the breast or armpit, is not a typical symptom of breast implant illness. Contact our rooms or your GP promptly and ask for an ultrasound, because it can be a sign of fluid around the implant, which needs testing for a rare lymphoma called BIA-ALCL.

WHAT MIGHT CAUSE IT?

Several possibilities are being studied, and none is proven. They include an immune or inflammatory reaction to the implant or to silicone, low-grade bacterial contamination (biofilm) on the implant, a reaction in the scar capsule, and individual susceptibility, such as a history of allergy or autoimmune disease.

IF YOU DEVELOP SYMPTOMS: WHAT TO DO

- ☐ **See your GP** for tests for common conditions with similar symptoms, such as a blood count, iron studies, vitamin B12, thyroid function and inflammatory markers
- ☐ **Have your implants checked** by your surgeon, with an ultrasound (and sometimes an MRI) to look for rupture, fluid or capsule problems
- ☐ **Find your implant details:** your implant card, operation report or the Australian Breast Device Registry (1800 998 722)
- ☐ **Report it**, if you wish, to the TGA as an adverse event. Reports help research

DOES REMOVING IMPLANTS HELP?

Many women report improvement after removal. A 2022 Dutch study of 109 women found significant improvement, although most still had some symptoms. An Australian study led by Professor Anand Deva reported that 85% of 77 women who had their implants removed had a significant reduction in symptoms at six months. Most studies have no comparison group, so improvement **cannot be promised**, and symptoms with another cause will not improve.

YOUR OPTIONS

OPTION	WHAT IT INVOLVES
Keep your implants	Continue monitoring, and investigate and treat other causes of your symptoms
Implant removal	The implants are removed, with some, all or none of the capsule depending on what is found. Capsule tissue is sent to the laboratory
Total intact capsulectomy	The implant and the whole capsule are removed together, capsule unopened. Needed if BIA-ALCL is suspected or there is a mass
Removal with a breast lift	Stretched skin is tightened, at the same time or later. Fat grafting can restore some volume later

You do not need an "en bloc" operation. The term comes from cancer surgery and is only accurate, and only needed, when BIA-ALCL or another cancer is suspected. There is no good evidence it improves symptoms more than removal with the right capsule management.

After removal the breasts are usually smaller and often lower than they were with implants. Surgery is usually a day case with a drain, with about two weeks off work and a return to full activity by around 12 weeks.

MEDICARE

Medicare item 45551 (removal with capsulectomy) applies where there is a medical reason, such as capsular contracture, a mass or BIA-ALCL. Symptoms alone do not meet its criteria. Item 45548 covers implant removal on its own. Your quote will set out what applies.

A PRECAUTION?

The TGA does not advise removing implants in women with no symptoms or concerns. Know how your breasts normally look and feel, check them regularly, and seek advice if anything changes.

You do not need a diagnosis to choose removal. To arrange an assessment, call **1300 267 726** (GP referral required).

Sources: TGA breast implant hub; Scientific Reports 2022; ABC News 2024 (Breast Device Registry data, Deva study); MBS.