What will happen if a cyst is left alone?

Breast cysts frequently fluctuate in size. This is commonly seen on routine annual mammograms. They may resolve and entirely disappear between annual examinations. This was observed in more than half of women with cysts followed at a breast center in Los Angeles. Since mammograms of women with breast cysts may look different each year, ultrasound may be needed to ensure complete evaluation.

For this reason diagnostic mammograms, rather than screening mammograms, are suggested for our patients with “cystic breasts.”
Breast cysts

Cysts are fluid-filled sacs within the breast. These sacs form when normal milk glands enlarge. The cause of this enlargement is not definite, but is very likely related to an imbalance between the normal production and absorption of fluid. Breast cysts may be solitary but are commonly multiple and can vary in size from microscopic to larger than a ping pong ball.

Breast cysts are common, particularly in women ages 40-60. Although larger cysts can sometimes be felt as “lumps”, many cysts are undetectable by physical examination.

In a study of more than 2,000 women in New York City, ultrasound found cysts in 30 percent of pre-menopausal women, seven percent of post-menopausal women and 20 percent of postmenopausal women who were taking hormone replacement. Only eight percent of these cysts could be felt at physical examination but half were seen on mammograms.

Cysts are frequently seen as abnormal shadows on mammograms. When this occurs, breast ultrasound examination is usually performed. Breast ultrasound is the most sensitive and accurate method for identification and diagnosis of breast cysts. With modern ultrasound equipment a diagnostic accuracy rate of more than 95 percent can be expected.

What is “fibrocystic disease”?

This is an unfortunate term which has achieved wide usage. It is frequently used to describe a “lumpy breast.” This is a common condition usually unassociated with prominent cysts and affecting at least half of women who may have irregular feeling breast tissue, cyclical pain and tenderness. These changes represent variable responses of breast tissue to cyclical fluctuations in levels of normal female hormones and are best designated as a benign “condition”, not a disease.

Do cysts lead to cancer?

Virtually all breast cysts identified as “simple cysts” by ultrasound are benign and remain so. It is estimated that perhaps one in 1,000 cysts may harbor a tumor (not necessarily malignant). These can usually be identified by their ultrasound appearance. Women with cysts are not at greater risk for the development of cancer. However, this risk may be minimally elevated if there is a positive family history of breast cancer involving a patient’s mother, sister or daughter.

Do cysts need to be aspirated?

When a breast lump is found, your doctor may elect to place a needle into the lump. This is a simple and effective technique which serves a dual purpose. It confirms the nature of the lump as “cystic” and extracting fluid from a cyst, frequently causes the lump to disappear. If no fluid is obtained, the lump is presumed not to be a cyst and whatever material is aspirated may be sent to the laboratory for analysis. When a cyst is discovered by ultrasound, aspiration is not generally recommended unless the cyst has some unusual features on the ultrasound image, or the cyst is associated with discomfort. If the cyst appears to contain material other than fluid on the ultrasound image, an aspiration procedure may be recommended.

If a cyst aspiration procedure is recommended these steps are followed:
1. The cyst will be located by ultrasound (sonogram).
2. The skin will be cleansed with an antibacterial solution.
3. A small needle will be inserted into the cyst. The fluid will then be drained until the cyst disappears.
4. When the needle is removed, a small bandage will be applied.

Does cyst fluid need to be analyzed in the laboratory?

Studies of breast cyst fluid from thousands of women have established that laboratory analysis of fluid is of value only if the appearance of the fluid suggests previous bleeding. Normal benign cyst fluid is usually yellow, green or grey and does not need to be analyzed.