Atypical Ductal Hyperplasia of the Breast (ADH)

If you have been found to have Atypical Ductal Hyperplasia of the breast (ADH), you will need expert advice on the treatment and follow-up that is the best for you. The following is general information and may not cover your situation exactly.

What is Atypical Ductal Hyperplasia of the breast (ADH)?
ADH is a condition that can occur in the lining of the milk ducts of the breast. Normally each duct is lined with an even layer of cells, but in an area affected by ADH, cell layers can stack unevenly. This extra growth is called, “hyperplasia.” If the cells look unusual in size or shape, it is referred to as, “atypia.” These cells are not cancerous, and ADH is not a form of breast cancer. The illustrations below show a normal duct and a duct that has developed extra cells.

Diagnosing ADH
ADH can be found through a routine mammogram. In order to be certain of the diagnosis and to be sure there is no cancer, a piece of tissue is needed (biopsy). Often a biopsy using a needle is the first step and sometimes a surgical biopsy is needed. Under local anesthetic, the physician removes a sample of tissue and then sends it to be looked at under the microscope. Sometimes surgery is recommended after finding ADH to remove more tissue in the area, and make sure that ADH is the only abnormality present.

Follow-up
ADH itself is harmless. However, it can slightly increase your risk of developing breast cancer in the future. Learning about this risk can cause anxiety, but the risk for cancer is quite small. Careful follow-up is important for all women with ADH. With regular follow-up, including yearly mammograms, any breast cancer that could develop is more likely to be found early, when cancer is most easily treated and cured.

You may speak to an oncologist (cancer specialist) or breast specialist to discuss your options. They will look at other factors, such as family history, to analyze your overall risk of breast cancer. Some women might consider taking hormone blocking medication to reduce this risk. However, this medication has drawbacks and side effects too which you will discuss with your provider.

Hormone replacement therapy
Female hormones (estrogen and progesterone) can fuel the growth of some breast cancers. Women who have ADH should think carefully before taking hormone replacement therapy and discuss it with their physician. In particular, ask about other ways to treat the symptoms of menopause. If you do take replacement hormones, take the smallest dose you can, for the shortest time possible.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.