

Breast Cancer in Women

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a growth of abnormal cells in the breast. It is the most common cancer in women.

The sooner cancer is found and treated, the better your chances for recovery. However, even advanced cancer can usually be treated. Treatment may slow or stop the growth of the cancer and ease symptoms for a time. Ask your healthcare provider what you can expect with the type of cancer that you have.

What is the cause?

The exact cause of breast cancer is not known. You may have a higher risk of breast cancer if:

- You are over age 60.
- You had breast cancer or some non-cancerous breast diseases.
- You have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer (especially mother, sister, or daughter, but also from other relatives on either your father's or mother's side).
- You have mutations in certain genes (BRCA1 and BRCA2).
- You had radiation therapy to the chest.
- You drink alcohol (risk rises as intake increases).
- You are overweight or obese after menopause.
- You do not get regular exercise.
- You had your first period before the age of 12.
- You never gave birth.
- You were older at the birth of your first child.
- You did not breastfeed.
- You went through menopause after age 55.
- You take hormone replacement therapy (estrogen and progesterone) for many years.

What are the symptoms?

Often the first sign of breast cancer is a lump in the breast. The lump is usually found in the upper, outer part of the breast and is not painful.

Other symptoms may include:

- Color change, dimpling, or puckering of the skin in some part of the breast
- A change in the size or shape of the breast
- Discharge from the nipple
- Change in nipple shape or appearance
- A lump in the armpit

Pain, tenderness, and soreness of the breast without a lump, especially during your period, are not usually symptoms of cancer. However, all breast signs or symptoms that last more than a few days need to be checked by your healthcare provider.

What is metastasis?

The spread of cancer cells from one part of the body to other parts is called metastasis. What causes cancer to spread is not known. Cancer cells can:

- Grow into the area around the tumor
- Travel to other parts of the body through the bloodstream or the lymph system. The lymph system has nodes that make blood cells to fight infection and vessels that carry fluid from the body back into the bloodstream.

New tumors then grow in these other areas. When breast cancer spreads, it is most often found in the bones of the pelvis, spine, upper arms and legs, ribs, and skull. Tumors are also commonly found in the liver, lungs, and brain.

Sometimes your first symptoms of cancer are in the part of the body where the cancer has spread. The symptoms of breast cancer that has spread to another part of your body depend on where the tumors are. For example,

- If the cancer has spread to the lungs, you may have a cough or trouble breathing.
- If the cancer has spread to the liver, you may have yellowish skin, pain, or swelling in your belly.
- If the cancer has spread to the bones, you may have pain or your bones may break easily.
- If the cancer has spread to the brain, you may have trouble thinking, speaking, or walking.

How is it diagnosed?

Many women will find a lump in their breast, either by chance or from a self-exam. Sometimes a healthcare provider will find a lump during a routine physical exam or a screening mammogram. Most breast lumps are not cancer. Often they are fluid-filled cysts that get larger and smaller with each menstrual cycle. However, any lump should be checked. You may have tests such as:

- Mammogram, which is an X-ray of the breast to look for cancer or to check a lump felt in the breast.
- Ultrasound, which uses sound waves to show pictures of the breast tissue
- MRI, which uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to show detailed pictures of the breast tissue
- Breast biopsy, which is the removal of a small sample of tissue for testing. The tissue is examined for the presence of cancer.

If you have discharge from a nipple and you are not breast feeding, some of the discharge can be placed on a microscope slide and examined for cancer cells.

How is it treated?

You and your healthcare provider will discuss possible treatments. You may also talk with a surgeon, medical oncologist, and radiation oncologist. Oncologists are cancer specialists.

Some things to think about when making treatment decisions are:

- Your age
- The stage of the cancer (how advanced the cancer is)
- The effect of hormones on the cancer
- The type of breast cancer
- Whether the cancer has spread to lymph nodes or other parts of your body

Possible treatments are:

- Surgery, such as:
 - Lumpectomy to remove a lump caused by cancer from your breast
 - Mastectomy to remove all of the breast
- Radiation therapy, which uses high-energy X-rays to kill cancer cells
- Chemotherapy (anticancer drugs), which uses medicine to kill cancer cells
- Hormone therapy, which uses medicine to stop hormones in your body from helping tumors grow
- Biological therapy, which uses medicine designed to help your immune system fight the cancer or block the growth of cancer cells

Often, more than 1 type of treatment is used.

If you are going to have surgery to remove your breast, talk to your healthcare provider about the options for breast reconstruction.

How can I take care of myself?

If you have been diagnosed with breast cancer:

- Talk about your cancer and treatment options with your healthcare provider. Make sure you understand your choices.
- Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider.
- Ask your healthcare provider:
 - How and when you will hear your test results
 - How long it will take to recover
 - What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
 - How to take care of yourself at home
 - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

Other things that may help include:

- Eat a healthy diet and get regular exercise and rest.
- Ask your provider if you need to avoid drinking alcohol. It may interfere with medicines you are taking. Alcohol can also make it harder for white blood cells to fight infections.
- Try to reduce stress and take time for activities that you enjoy. It may help to talk with a counselor about your illness.
- Talk with your family and your healthcare providers about your concerns. Ask your healthcare provider any questions you have about the disease, treatments, side effects of the treatments, sexuality, support groups, and anything else that concerns you.
- Tell your provider if your treatment causes discomfort. Usually there are ways to help you be more comfortable.

After your treatment, it is still important to check your breast area for changes. This may help you discover any signs that the cancer has come back or a new cancer has started.

There are many support services for women with breast cancer. You can find the names of groups and agencies from your healthcare provider or through your local American Cancer Society office.

How can I help prevent the cancer from spreading or coming back?

- Complete the full course of radiation, hormone, or chemotherapy treatments recommended by your healthcare provider.
- See your healthcare provider right away if you notice a return of any previous signs or symptoms or develop any new ones.

For more information, contact:

- American Cancer Society, Inc.
800-227-2345
<http://www.cancer.org>
- National Cancer Institute
800-422-6237 (TTY: 800-332-8615)
<http://www.cancer.gov>

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