

ASCO ANSWERS

BREAST CANCER

WHAT IS BREAST CANCER?

Breast cancer is a disease in which normal cells in the breast begin to change, grow without control, and no longer die, forming a mass of cells called a tumor. Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in women in the United States.

WHAT ARE THE PARTS OF THE BREAST?

The breast is mostly fatty tissue. It contains a network of lobes made up of tiny, tube-like structures called lobules that contain milk glands.

Tiny ducts connect the glands, lobules, and lobes, and carry the milk from the lobes to the nipple.

About 90% of all breast cancers originate in the ducts or lobes of the breast.

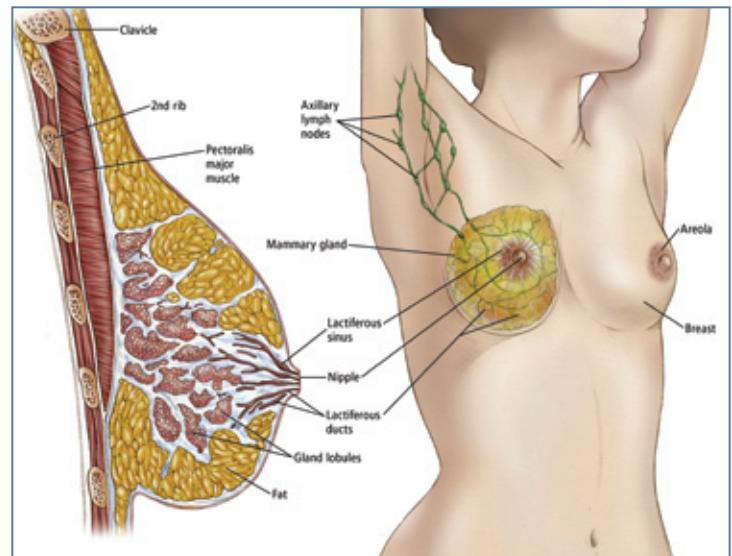


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Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing the cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and if it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. There are five stages for breast cancer: stage 0 (zero) and stages I through IV (one through four). Illustrations for these stages are available at www.cancer.net/breast.

HOW IS BREAST CANCER TREATED?

Not all breast cancer is the same. The biology of the breast cancer affects its behavior and treatment. The factors considered in a person's treatment include the stage and grade (how different the cancer cells look from healthy cells) of the cancer; the tumor's hormone receptor status (estrogen receptor [ER]) and progesterone receptor [PR]) and human epidermal growth factor receptor-2 (HER2) status; the genetic description of the tumor, the presence of known mutations (changes) to breast cancer genes; and the woman's age, general health, and menopausal status. For cancer that is not advanced, surgery to remove the tumor usually is the first treatment. Additional treatment may be given to lower the risk of the cancer returning. This includes radiation therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy, and/or hormone therapy. When making treatment decisions, women may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of breast cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health-care team.

HOW CAN I COPE WITH BREAST CANCER?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the breast cancer?
- Has cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
- What is the hormonal status of the tumor? The HER2 status? What does this mean?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?
- How will this treatment benefit me?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What is the expected timeline for my treatment plan?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/breast.

Information in ASCO's patient education materials is not intended as medical advice or as a substitute for the treating doctor's own professional judgment; nor does it imply ASCO endorsement of any product, service, or company.

ASCO believes that all treatment decisions should be made between patients and their doctors.

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website,
www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.**

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TERMS TO KNOW

Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

DCIS:

Ductal carcinoma in situ; cancer has not spread past the ducts

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Lumpectomy:

The removal of the tumor and area around the tumor

Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

Mastectomy:

The removal of the entire breast

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Tumor:

A mass of tissue that requires a biopsy