

Breast Cancer - Overview [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 05/2014

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net's Guide to Breast Cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

In the United States, breast cancer is the most common cancer in women (excluding skin cancer). Men can also develop breast cancer, but [breast cancer in men](#) [3] is rare, accounting for less than 1% of all breast cancers.

About the breast

The breast is mostly made up of fatty tissue. Within this tissue is a network of lobes, which are made up of tiny, tube-like structures called lobules that contain milk glands. Tiny ducts connect the glands, lobules, and lobes, carrying the milk from the lobes to the nipple, located in the middle of the areola, which is the darker area that surrounds the nipple. Blood and lymph vessels also run throughout the breast; blood nourishes the cells, and the lymph system drains bodily waste products. The lymph vessels connect to lymph nodes, the tiny, bean-shaped organs that help fight infection.

About breast cancer

Cancer begins when normal cells in the breast change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass or sheet of cells called a tumor. A tumor can be cancerous or benign. A cancerous tumor is malignant, meaning it can spread to other parts of the body. A benign tumor means the tumor will not spread.

Breast cancer spreads when the cancer grows into other parts of the body or when breast cancer cells move to other parts of the body through the blood vessels and/or lymph vessels. This is called metastasis. Breast cancer most commonly spreads to the regional lymph nodes. The regional lymph nodes are located under the arm, in the neck, under the chest bone, or just above the collarbone. When the cancer spreads further through the body, it most commonly spreads to the bones, lungs, and liver. Less often, breast cancer may spread to the brain. The cancer can come back after treatment, or recur, locally in the breast, skin, other tissues of the chest, or elsewhere in the body.

Types of breast cancer

Most breast cancers start in the ducts or lobes. Almost 75% of all breast cancers begin in the cells lining the milk ducts and are called ductal carcinomas. Cancer that begins in the lobules is called lobular carcinoma. The diagnosis of ductal or lobular cancer is determined by a pathologist who examines the tumor sample removed during a biopsy (see [Diagnosis](#) [4]). A pathologist is a doctor who specializes in interpreting laboratory tests and evaluating cells, tissues, and organs to diagnose disease.

If the disease has spread outside of the duct or lobule and into the surrounding tissue, it is called invasive or infiltrating ductal or lobular carcinoma. Cancer that is located only in the duct or lobule is called in situ, meaning "in place." How in situ disease grows and spreads, as well as how it is treated, depends on whether it is ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) or lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS).

Most in situ breast cancers are DCIS. Currently, oncologists recommend surgery to remove DCIS to help prevent the development of invasive breast cancer that can then spread to other parts of the breast or the body. Radiation therapy and hormonal therapy may also be recommended for DCIS (see [Treatment Options](#) [5] for more information).

LCIS is not considered cancer and is usually monitored with regular examinations and imaging tests. LCIS in one breast is a risk factor for developing invasive breast cancer in both breasts (see the [Risk Factors](#) [6] section for more information). To reduce this risk, LCIS is sometimes treated with hormonal therapy (see [Treatment Options](#) [5]).

Other, less common types of breast cancer include medullary, mucinous, tubular, [metaplastic](#) [7], and papillary breast cancer, as well as other even less common types. [Inflammatory breast cancer](#) [8] is a faster-growing type of cancer that accounts for about 1% to 5% of all breast cancers. It may be misdiagnosed as a breast infection at first because there is often swelling of the breast and redness of the breast skin that begins suddenly, and there is no breast mass or nodule. Paget's disease is a type of cancer that begins in the ducts of the nipple. The skin often appears scaly and may be itchy. Although it is usually in situ, it can also be an invasive cancer.

Looking for More of an Overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore these related items. Please note these links take you to other sections on Cancer.Net:

- [ASCO Answers Fact Sheet \[9\]](#): Read a one-page fact sheet (available as a PDF) that offers an easy-to-print introduction to this type of cancer.
- [ASCO Answers Guide \[10\]](#): This 52-page booklet (available as a PDF) helps newly diagnosed patients better understand their disease and treatment options, as well as keep track of the specifics of their individual cancer care plan.
- [Cancer.Net Patient Education Video \[11\]](#): View a short video led by an ASCO expert in this type of cancer that provides basic information and areas of research.
- [Cancer.Net En Español: Read about breast cancer in Spanish \[12\]](#). Infórmase sobre [cáncer de mama en español \[12\]](#).
- View a short video produced by the Hawaii Society of Clinical Oncology in the [Tagalog language \[13\]](#) or [Ilocano language \[14\]](#) with information about this cancer. Panoorin ang isang maikling video na ito sa wikang [Tagalog \[13\]](#) na may impormasyon tungkol sa kanser na ito. Buya-en daytoy ababa nga [Ilokano \[14\]](#) a bidyo maipanggep kadagiti impormasyon kadetoy a kanser.

To continue reading this guide, use the menu on the side of your screen to select another section.

Links:

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/breast-cancer/overview>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18590>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18624>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18626>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18621>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18603>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18576>
- [9] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_breast.pdf
- [10] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_guide_breast.pdf
- [11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/29046>
- [12] <http://www.cancer.net/es/node/31362>
- [13] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOuUqYQPObM>
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