

## **Breast Cancer - Questions to Ask the Doctor** [1]

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

**ON THIS PAGE:** You will find some questions to ask your doctor or other members of your health care team, to help you better understand your diagnosis, treatment plan, and overall care. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

Talking often with the doctor is important [3] to make informed decisions about your health care. These suggested questions are a starting point to help you learn more about your cancer care and treatment. You are also encouraged to ask additional questions that are important to you. You may want to print this list and bring it to your child's next appointment, or download Cancer.Net's free mobile app [4] for an e-list and other interactive tools to manage your care.

### **Questions to ask your entire health care team**

- Is there enough information to recommend a treatment plan for me? If not, which tests or procedures will be needed?
- Who would you recommend for a second opinion?
- When do I need to make a treatment decision?
- Who will be part of my health care team, and what does each member do?
- Who will be coordinating my overall treatment and follow-up care?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- What can I do to get ready for treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns? Who can help me understand what aspects of my care are covered by my insurance?
- Whom can I call if I have a problem or question about my treatment? Whom do I call if I experience side effects?
- Do you communicate with your patients by email or with an electronic health record system?
- Who can I contact for supportive and emotional help for me? For my family?
- If I have a strong family history of cancer, what is my chance of getting another cancer? How does that change my treatment options? Should I see a genetic counselor?

### **Questions to ask your breast surgeon, before your first surgery**

- Are you board-certified?
- Do you specialize in this type of surgery?

- How many operations like the one I am considering have you performed?
- Do I need any other tests before this surgery?
- Am I a candidate for a lumpectomy?
- Do I need a mastectomy? If so, would you recommend an immediate breast reconstruction (plastic surgery)? What are the advantages and disadvantages to this?
- Do the lymph nodes in my underarm need to be removed?
- What is a sentinel lymph node biopsy? What are the benefits and risks? Would you recommend it for me?
- What is the risk of lymphedema with a sentinel lymph node biopsy? With axillary lymph node dissection?
- Should I consider chemotherapy before surgery?
- When do I need to make a decision about surgery?
- What should I do to get ready for the operation? Do you have recommendations on how to help me relax before surgery?
- What medications and supplements should I stop taking? Should I stop taking hormone replacement therapy? What about birth control pills?
- Will you describe exactly what you will be doing during this operation, and why?
- Will my tumor be saved? Where will it be stored? For how long? How can it be accessed in the future?
- What are the potential risks and side effects of this operation? What can be done to ease side effects following surgery?
- Does the hospital offer programs that help aid healing?
- What can I expect regarding the operation?
  - Will I need to be admitted to a hospital for this operation? If so, how long will I stay in the hospital?
  - How long will my surgery take?
  - What type of anesthesia will I need for this operation?
  - How long do I have to wait for my preoperative test results? Do I call you, or does your office call me?
  - Will a pathologist examine the tissue and write a report? Who will explain that report to me?
  - What are the possible complications for this type of surgery? How would I know if there is a problem?
  - How long will it take me to recover after the surgery?
  - When can I return to work and other daily activities?
  - Will I have stitches, staples, and/or bandages?
  - Will there be permanent effects from the surgery?
  - Where will the scar be, and what will it look like?
  - What type of clothes should I bring to go home it? Will I need a special type of bra?
  - Are there instructions or post-operative care pamphlets I can take home with me? When can I shower or bathe?
  - Will I need to have surgical drains? What does this mean? How long will the surgical drains be in?
  - Do I need a nurse to visit my home after surgery? How is this arranged?
  - When will I need to return for a follow-up appointment?
  - Will I need help at home after the surgery?

- What kind of pain will I be in afterwards? Can you help me manage my pain?
- When should I call your office if I experience any side effects?

### **Questions to ask your breast surgeon, after your first surgery**

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- What is the size of the tumor?
- What is the grade and stage of this disease? What does this mean?
- What are the chances that the breast cancer will return?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- Can I get a copy of my pathology report? How and when can I get these results?
- Was all of the cancer removed during the surgery?
- How many lymph nodes were removed?
- Has the cancer spread to any of the lymph nodes? If so, how many? Has the cancer spread to anywhere else in my body?
- Do I need additional surgery?
- If I have a mastectomy without reconstruction, where can I get a prosthesis? Is this covered through my insurance?
- Will my arm be affected by surgery? For how long? Will I need physical therapy for my arm?
- When will I be able to work and/or return to my normal routine? Are there any activities I should refrain from?
- Will my surgeon communicate with my medical oncologist?
- Do you recommend any genetic testing of the tumor?

### **Questions to ask your medical oncologist**

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- What is the size of my tumor?
- What is the grade and stage of this disease? What does this mean?
- What is the hormone status of my tumor? What does this mean?
- What is my HER2 status? What does this mean?
- Do you recommend any genetic testing of the tumor?
- Do I need more tests to find out if there is cancer anywhere else in my body?
- Do you recommend genetic testing and seeing a genetics counselor?
- Do I need other treatment, such as chemotherapy or hormonal therapy?
- What is chemotherapy? What is hormonal (endocrine) therapy? What is targeted therapy?
- What are my options for treatment?
- What clinical trials are available to me? Where are they located, and how do I find out more about them?
- How will each treatment option benefit me? What are the risks?
- What is the expected timeline for each treatment option?
- What treatment plan do you recommend for me? Why?
- When do I need to make a decision about starting additional treatment?
- Should I consider my family's history of breast cancer in making my decision about treatment?
- How does having reached (or not reached) menopause affect my treatment options?
- What is my prognosis?

- What can I do to get ready for this treatment?
- Should I bring someone with me to my chemotherapy treatment?
- What are the potential side effects of each treatment?
- Will I lose my hair, and can I do anything to prevent hair loss?
- What can be done to ease side effects?
- 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 sex life? If so, how and for how long? Is there anything I can do to prevent or treat these effects?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to have children (fertility)? Should I talk with a fertility specialist before treatment begins? Are there other treatments available that do not pose as high a risk to my fertility but are equally effective?
- How much time do I have before I have to start my cancer therapy?
- Can I become pregnant while receiving chemotherapy or radiation therapy? What happens if I become pregnant during treatment? Is there a risk of birth defects and/or harm to the fetus and/or to me?
- How long should I wait after cancer treatment before trying to have a child?
- What lifestyle changes should I consider making during my treatment?
- Do you recommend any nutritional supplements or changes to my diet?
- Can I take herbal supplements during my treatment? Is there any risk?
- How will you determine if the cancer has come back after treatment?
- If I have a strong family history of cancer, what is my chance of getting another cancer?
- After my treatment has ended, what will my follow-up care plan be?
- How often will I need to see a doctor?
- What tests will I need?
- How often will I need those tests?
- Can I get copies of my laboratory test results?

### **Questions to ask your radiation oncologist**

- What is the goal of this treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer?
- What are the chances that this treatment will prevent the cancer from coming back?
- If the cancer comes back, can I get radiation therapy again?
- How often will I receive radiation therapy?
- Are there alternatives to the recommended treatment?
- How much time will each treatment take?
- Can I bring someone with me to treatment?
- Will each treatment be the same? Does the radiation dose or area treated change throughout the period of treatment?
- What can I do to get ready for this treatment? Are there recommendations on what clothes to wear or leave behind?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will you describe what I will experience when I receive radiation therapy? Will it hurt or cause me discomfort during the treatment?
- What are the potential side effects of this treatment? How can I ease side effects?
- How will my skin be affected during radiation therapy? What skin products can I use each

day?

- Do I need to be concerned about sun exposure?
- Should I avoid certain foods, vitamins, or supplements?
- Should I avoid using deodorant or antiperspirant during treatment?
- What are the possible long-term effects of this treatment?
- If I decide to have reconstructive surgery, how would that affect my treatment plan?
- Will this treatment affect my fertility?
- Are there special services for patients receiving radiation therapy, such as certain parking spaces or parking rates?

### **Questions to ask if you have metastatic breast cancer**

- Where else in my body has the cancer spread?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? What is the goal of each treatment?
- What will happen if this treatment stops working?
- What supportive care will be given to help control my symptoms and side effects?
- What will happen if I choose to stop treatment?
- What level of caregiving will I need at this time?
- What support services are available specifically for people with metastatic breast cancer?

### **Questions to ask your plastic surgeon**

- Are you board-certified? Is breast reconstruction your specialty?
- How many breast reconstruction surgeries do you perform in a year?
- Now that you have examined me, am I a candidate for reconstruction?
- What types of breast reconstruction options do I have?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type?
- When can I have my reconstruction?
- Will I need surgery to the non-reconstructed breast to make the breasts match?
- Will I need to coordinate this with my breast surgeon?
- If I have radiation therapy, does that change my options for reconstruction?
- What are tissue expanders, and will I need them?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- Which type of implants do you recommend (saline or silicone), and why? What size?
- If you use tissue from another part of my body to rebuild my breast(s), where do you recommend it be taken from, and why?
- If I have a mastectomy with implant reconstruction, can I also have a nipple reconstruction? If so, when?
- What are the costs involved with breast reconstruction? What is covered by my insurance? Is surgery on the non-reconstructed breast covered by insurance?
- How long will the surgery take?
- What do I need to do to prepare for the surgery?
- What type of anesthesia will I need for this operation?
- What can I expect after the operation?
  - How long will I stay in the hospital?

- What are the possible complications for this type of surgery?
  - How long will it take me to recover?
  - When can I resume my normal activities, including exercise?
  - Will I need to have surgical drains? What does this mean?
  - Will I have stitches, staples, and/or bandages?
  - Will there be a scar or other permanent effects from the surgery?
  - Are there instructions or post-operative care pamphlets I can take home with me?
  - When will I need to return for a follow-up appointment?
  - What type of results can I expect?
- Are there photographs of reconstructed breasts that I can view?
  - How will the reconstructed breast feel to the touch?
  - What type of sensation (feeling) will the reconstructed breast have?
  - What changes to the reconstructed breast can I expect over time?
  - Will I need to have surgery again in the future (for example, to replace implants over time)?
  - Do I need mammograms or MRI tests after a breast reconstruction?
  - What can I expect if my weight changes?
  - What if I become pregnant in the future?

### **Questions to ask your fertility specialist**

If you are a young women with breast cancer and you are concerned about your ability to have children in the future, you are encouraged to talk with a fertility specialist (in addition to the doctors listed above) as early as possible after your diagnosis and before cancer treatment begins. Recommendations from the fertility specialist should always be discussed with your oncologist as well, before starting any fertility-related efforts.

- How often do you advise people with cancer?
- What are my options to preserve my fertility?
- What are the costs involved with my options to preserve fertility? What is covered by my insurance?

Learn more about [preserving fertility before cancer treatment](#) [5].

*The next section offers some more resources that may be helpful to you. Use the menu on the side of your screen to select Additional Resources, or you can select another section, to continue reading this guide.*

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#### **Links:**

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/breast-cancer/questions-ask-doctor>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25171>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/29951>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/29921>