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## Breast Cancer: Overview

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### What is breast cancer?

Cancer is when cells in the body change and grow out of control. In most cancer types, the changed (abnormal) cells often grow to form a lump or mass called a tumor. Cancer cells can also grow into (invade) nearby areas. And they can spread to other parts of the body. This is called metastasis.

The breast is made of fatty tissue, ducts, and lobules. The lobules make breast milk. The ducts are thin tubes that carry it to the nipple. Ductal carcinoma is the most common type of breast cancer. It starts in the ducts of the breast. Cancer can start in other parts of the breast, too.

### Who is at risk for breast cancer?

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. The exact cause of someone's cancer may not be known. But risk factors can make it more likely for a person to have cancer. Some risk factors may not be in your control. But others may be things you can change.

The risk factors for breast cancer include:

- Older age
- History of breast cancer
- Certain breast changes that are not cancer
- Starting your period when you're young or stopping at a late age
- Certain gene changes passed in families
- Having many family members with breast, ovary, uterus, colon, or prostate cancer
- Radiation treatment to your chest when you were young
- Never having children or never breastfeeding
- First pregnancy at a late age
- Using certain hormone therapies for menopause changes
- Drinking alcohol
- Obesity
- Not being physically active
- Smoking tobacco

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for breast cancer and what you can do about them.

### Can breast cancer be prevented?

There is no sure way to prevent breast cancer. Some risk factors can be controlled to help reduce risk. People at high risk may want to take certain medicines or even have surgery to remove their breasts to prevent breast cancer.

### Are there screening tests for breast cancer?

Regular testing to look for breast cancer is the best way to find it when it's small and before it has spread. A breast X-ray called a mammogram is used to look for breast cancer. It can show cancer before tumors are big enough to feel or cause problems. People at high risk may get another test, called an MRI, along with their mammograms.

### What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

You can have breast cancer with no symptoms. But it's good to know how your breasts normally look and feel so you can spot any changes and see a healthcare provider right away. Common signs of breast cancer include:

- A lump you can feel
- Skin on your breast that is red, puckered, scaly, or itchy
- Dimples in your breast that look like the outside of an orange
- Change in the size or shape of your breast
- Nipple that turns inward
- Fluid coming out of your nipple that's not breast milk
- Swollen lymph nodes by your collarbone or armpit

Many of these may be caused by other health problems. But it is important to see a healthcare provider if you have these symptoms. Only a healthcare provider can tell if you have cancer.

## How is breast cancer diagnosed?

The most common way to find breast cancer is during a routine mammogram before you have symptoms or when a woman finds a lump in her breast or armpit. If you find a lump, you should see a healthcare provider right away. The healthcare provider will look at your breasts and feel the lump. Ultrasound may be used to see if the lump is solid or filled with fluid. A mammogram of the breast is often done.

A biopsy is the only way to know if a lump or change is cancer. Small pieces of tissue are taken out and checked for cancer cells. A hollow needle may be used to take out the bits of tissue. The samples are sent to a lab. Your results will come back in about 1 week.

After a diagnosis of breast cancer, you may have other tests. These help your healthcare providers learn more about the cancer. They can help determine the stage of the cancer. The stage is how much and how far the cancer has spread (metastasized) in your body. It is one of the most important things to know when deciding how to treat the cancer.

Once your cancer is staged, your healthcare provider will talk with you about what the stage means for your treatment. Ask your healthcare provider to explain the stage of your cancer to you in a way you can understand.

## How is breast cancer treated?

Your treatment choices depend on the type of breast cancer you have, test results, and the stage of the cancer. Other things to think about are if the cancer can be removed with surgery and your overall health. The goal of treatment may be to cure you, control the cancer, or help ease problems caused by the cancer. Talk with your healthcare team about your treatment choices, the goals of treatment, and what the risks and side effects may be.

Types of treatment for cancer are either local or systemic. Local treatments remove, destroy, or control cancer cells in one area. Surgery and radiation are local treatments. Systemic treatment is used to destroy or control cancer cells that may have spread in your body. When taken by pill or injection, chemotherapy is a systemic treatment. Most women with breast cancer will be treated with surgery. Some will also need radiation, chemo, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or hormone therapy.

You may have just one treatment or a combination of treatments.

Talk with your healthcare providers about your treatment choices. Make a list of questions. Think about the benefits and possible side effects of each choice. Talk about your concerns with your healthcare provider before making a decision.

## What are treatment side effects?

Cancer treatment, such as chemotherapy and radiation, can damage normal cells. This causes side effects, such as hair loss, mouth sores, and vomiting. Talk with your healthcare provider about side effects you might have and ways to manage them. There may be things you can do and medicines you can take to help prevent or control side effects.

## Coping with breast cancer

Many people feel worried, depressed, and stressed when dealing with cancer. Getting treatment for cancer can be hard on your mind and body. Keep talking with your healthcare team about any problems or concerns you have. Work together to ease the effect of cancer and its symptoms on your daily life.

Here are tips:

- Talk with your family or friends.
- Ask your healthcare team or social worker for help.
- Speak with a counselor.
- Talk with a spiritual advisor, such as a minister or rabbi.
- Ask your healthcare team about medicines for depression or anxiety.
- Keep socially active.
- Join a cancer support group.

Cancer treatment is also hard on the body. To help yourself stay healthier, try to:

- Eat a healthy diet, with a focus on high-protein foods.
- Drink plenty of water, fruit juices, and other liquids.
- Keep physically active.
- Rest as much as needed.
- Talk with your healthcare team about ways to manage treatment side effects.
- Take your medicines as directed by your team.

## When should I call my healthcare provider?

Your healthcare provider will talk with you about when to call. You may be told to call if you have any of the below:

- New symptoms or symptoms that get worse
- Signs of an infection, such as a fever
- Side effects of treatment that affect your daily function or don't get better with treatment

Ask your healthcare provider what signs to watch for, and when to call. Know how to get help after office hours and on weekends and holidays.

## Key points about breast cancer

- Ductal carcinoma is the most common type of breast cancer. It starts in the ducts of the breast. Cancer can start in other parts of the breast, too.
- Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for breast cancer and what you can do about them.
- Regular testing to look for breast cancer is the best way to find it when it's small and before it has spread.
- You can have breast cancer with no symptoms. But it's good to know how your breasts normally look and feel so you can spot any changes and see a healthcare provider right away.
- The most common way to find breast cancer is during a routine mammogram before you have symptoms.
- Your treatment choices depend on the type of breast cancer you have, test results, and the stage of the cancer.
- Keep talking with your healthcare team about any problems or concerns you have. Work together to ease the effect of cancer and its symptoms on your daily life.

## Next steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your healthcare provider:

- Know the reason for your visit and what you want to happen.
- Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.
- Bring someone with you to help you ask questions and remember what your provider tells you.
- At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis, and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your provider gives you.
- Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed, and how it will help you. Also know what the side effects are.
- Ask if your condition can be treated in other ways.
- Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.
- Know what to expect if you do not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.
- If you have a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.
- Know how you can contact your provider if you have questions.

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