

Breast Cancer

Cancer cells are abnormal cells. Cancer cells grow and divide more quickly than healthy cells. Some cancer cells may form growths called tumors. All tumors increase in size, but some tumors grow quickly, others slowly. Cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body through the blood and lymph systems. This is called **metastasis**.

Breast cancer is when cancer starts in the breast. Breast cancer can be found by mammogram, by a woman feeling a lump or by a doctor's exam. To find breast cancer, it is important to:

- Do monthly self breast exams.
- Have a yearly exam by your doctor if you are over 40. These are done less often for younger women.
- Have a mammogram each year after age 40.

Breast Tissue

A woman's breasts may feel more firm and lumpy before menopause. A woman has less estrogen after menopause, so the breasts feel much softer and less lumpy.

The firm, lumpy tissue can hide a small lump making it hard to feel. By checking your breasts each month, you become familiar with your breast tissue and notice changes. Small lumps can also be found by a mammogram or by a doctor during your exam. Some lumps are so small that only a mammogram can find them.

Tests

If a lump is found, a mammogram or ultrasound will be done. A biopsy is often done to check if the lump is cancer and if so, what type. A biopsy is a procedure to remove tiny pieces of tissue. The samples are then checked by a doctor. If the biopsy finds cancer, more tests may be done to see if the cancer has spread to other parts of your body.

Types of Treatment

Based on your biopsy results and the type of cancer, you and your doctor will decide the best treatment for your breast cancer. Here are the treatments that may be done:

Surgery

Surgery is done to remove as much of the cancer as possible. Either the whole breast is removed, called **mastectomy**, or a part of the breast is removed, called **lumpectomy**. With either surgery, lymph nodes under the arm are checked for cancer. You and your doctor may also talk about **reconstruction surgery**. This surgery is done to create the look of a normal breast.

You may still need to have more treatment. Having a mastectomy or lumpectomy does not guarantee that the breast cancer is gone from the entire body. Small cancer cells that are too small to detect may remain in the body.

Radiation Therapy

When a lumpectomy is done, it is often followed by **radiation therapy**. Radiation therapy is done to treat the entire breast. Radiation therapy often begins 4 to 6 weeks after surgery.

Hormone Therapy and Chemotherapy

Treatment may be needed to target cancer cells that may be remaining in the body. It may be done before surgery to shrink a tumor or after surgery to kill cancer cells that may have spread or that remain in the body.

- **Hormone therapy** is medicine in pill form taken to work against estrogen in the body. The most common side effect is signs of menopause.
- **Chemotherapy** is medicine given in an IV (intravenous) tube in a vein or as a pill. The medicine kills cancer cells. Common side effects include feeling tired, hair loss and nausea. These side effects are often temporary.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns.

2/2008. Developed through a partnership of The Ohio State University Medical Center, Mount Carmel Health and OhioHealth, Columbus, Ohio. Available for use as a public service without copyright restrictions at www.healthinfotranslations.org.