

BREAST CANCER

This information sheet is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your doctor or other healthcare provider with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

Breast cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the breast. Breast cancer occurs most commonly in women, but can occur in men too. Breast cancer cells can be felt as a lump as they are usually a tumour. However not all types of breast cancer cause a lump and not all breast lumps are cancerous. Benign or non-cancerous breast lumps are abnormal growths that are life-threatening and do not spread outside the breast. Some types of benign breast lumps increase your risk of developing cancer. Any type of breast lump should be examined by a medical professional. Breast cancer can spread when the cancer cells get into the blood or lymph system. If cancer cells are present in lymph nodes, there is a higher chance of spread of cancer to other parts of the body.

What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

Some of the symptoms listed below may be caused by things other than breast cancer but they should be discussed with your doctor to rule out breast cancer.

- Swelling of all or part of a breast (even if no lump is felt)
- Skin dimpling (sometimes looking like an orange peel)
- Breast or nipple pain
- Nipple retraction (turns inward)
- Nipple or breast skin that is red, dry, flaking or thickened
- Nipple discharge (other than breast milk)
- Swollen lymph nodes

Regular breast cancer screening is important as many women with breast cancer experience no symptoms.

Diagnosis

The following tests are useful in making a diagnosis and determining the extent of the disease once the diagnosis has been made:

- Mammography can detect cancers at an earlier stage.
- Biopsy and/or removal of the breast lump can be taken for pathological analysis (lab tests).
- Chest x-ray, ultrasound examination of the abdomen and bone scans are used to check for spread of cancer beyond the breast.
- Blood analysis as a medical evaluation of the spread of the disease as well as a baseline test for the relevant treatment (chemotherapy) that may affect certain cells in the body.

Your doctor may require further investigation depending on your symptoms at the time of the tests.

What happens now that I am diagnosed with breast cancer?

Once your breast cancer diagnosis has been confirmed your doctor might carry out tests to determine the stage of the cancer. The stage of a cancer helps determine how serious the cancer is, if it has spread to other parts of the body and how best to treat it.

Questions you can ask your doctor upon diagnosis

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- How big is the cancer?
- Where exactly is the cancer?
- Has the cancer spread to my lymph nodes or other organs?
- What does stage of cancer mean?
- What stage cancer do I have?
- Do I need any other tests before a decision on type of treatment is made?
- Are there other medical professionals I should be consulting?
- What does hormone receptor status of cancer mean?

- What is the hormone receptor status of my cancer?
- What does HER2 status of cancer mean?
- What is the HER2 status of my cancer?
- How do these factors affect my treatment options and long-term outlook?
- What are my chances of survival, based on my cancer as you see it?
- Is there a need to do genetic testing, and if so, what are my testing options?
- How do I get a copy of my lab test results e.g. pathology report?

Treatment options

Treatment will depend on the nature and extent of the condition, as well as on your general state of health.

Breast cancer is treatable with surgery and radiation therapy, chemotherapy and hormonal therapy and often curable when detected in its early stages.

Surgery depends on the extent of the condition and can be either a partial resection (removal of breast tissue affected by the cancer) or total mastectomy (removal of the breasts). After partial resection, radiation therapy (cancer treatment using high-energy rays) is frequently administered to the remainder of the breast to reduce the risk for tumour recurrence. Some patients need radiation to the chest wall even after a mastectomy, as they still have a substantial risk for a relapse of their cancer. In most incidences, additional chemotherapy and/or hormonal therapy is also given to reduce the risk of the cancer spreading to other body parts at a later stage.

In advanced stages of the condition, chemotherapy, hormonal and radiation therapy is often used either alone or in combination with each other. Breast cancer remains a responsive condition (i.e. it can be treated) and major advances in treatment have been made over the past decade.

Questions you can ask your doctor about your treatment

- How much experience do you have treating this type of cancer?
- Would you recommend I get a second opinion? How would I go about getting a second opinion?
- What are my treatment options?
- Which treatment option would you recommend, and why?
- What would the goal of the treatment be?
- What are clinical trials and should I consider taking part in one?
- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- Where can I access treatment and how long will treatment last?
- What should I do to get ready for treatment?
- What are the risks or side effects of the recommended treatment? Are there things I can do to reduce these side effects?
- How will treatment affect my daily activities of living? Will I be able to work fulltime?
- Will I be able to have children after treatment i.e. will the treatment affect my fertility? Would I be able to breastfeed?
- What are the chances the cancer will come back (recur) after this treatment?
- What would happen if the treatment doesn't work or if the cancer comes back, are there other treatment options?
- What if I don't have transport to and from the place of treatment?

Questions you can ask your doctor if you need surgery

- Is breast-conserving surgery (lumpectomy) an option for me?
- What is a mastectomy (removal of the breast)?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of a lumpectomy versus mastectomy?
- How many of these surgeries have you done?
- Will you have to take out lymph nodes? If so, how is this done?
- What side effects might lymph node removal cause?
- For how long will I be hospitalised?
- Will I have stitches or staples in my body at the surgery site? Will there be a drain (tube) coming out of the site?
- How do I care for the post-surgery wound? Will I need someone to help me?
- What will my breasts look and feel like after my treatment? Will I have normal feeling in them?
- What will the scar look like?

- Is breast reconstruction surgery an option if I want it and can it be done at the same time as my surgery to remove the cancer?
- What types of breast reconstruction options are available to me?
- Should I speak to a plastic surgeon about breast reconstruction options?
- Will I need a breast form (prosthesis), and if so, where can I get one?
- Do I need to stop taking any medication or supplements before surgery?
- May I call your office if I'm having side effects?

Questions you can ask your doctor during treatment

- How do I know if the treatment is working?
- How do I help manage any side effects?
- Are there any symptoms or side effects I should tell you about immediately?
- How can I reach you after hours, during holidays or weekends, and who is the alternative contact person?
- Is there a special diet I need to follow?
- Are there any limits on what I can do during treatment?
- Will I need special tests, such as imaging scans or blood tests? How often?

Questions you can ask your doctor after treatment

- Will I need to follow a special diet after treatment?
- Are there any limits on what I can do after treatment?
- What is lymphedema and am I at risk of getting it?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk for lymphedema?
- What should I do if I notice swelling in my arm?
- Are there any symptoms that I should watch out for?
- Is there a particular type of exercise that I should do now?
- How often will I need to have follow-up exams, blood tests or imaging tests?
- What should I watch out for in case the cancer comes back? And what should I do in this case?

If you have any questions or experience any concerns during the phases of diagnosis, treatment, recovery and post recovery, please raise them with your treatment team i.e. your treating doctor, oncologist, specialist and/or other healthcare providers e.g. physiotherapist.

References:

1. AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY. Website. <http://www.cancer.org>.
2. CANCER MONTHLY. Website. www.cancermonthly.com.
3. CANCERCARE (previously GVI Oncology South Africa). Website. <http://www.cancercare.co.za>.

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