

Breast Cancer Staging

A Guide for Patients/Families



What does cancer staging mean, and how is the stage determined?

- Stage of cancer may determine the best treatment approach and predict the treatment outcome
- The tumour size determines the stage and whether it has spread beyond where it started. Staging is a process of clinically and pathologically identifying the stage of cancer
- **Clinical staging** takes physical examination and breast/axillary imaging into account initially. Based on findings, your doctor may request additional tests and imaging to assess the spread of cancer. These tests include a computed tomography (CT) scan of your chest, an ultrasound or CT scan of your abdomen, and a bone scan, or a positron emission tomography (PET) scan. These additional tests are called the “metastatic workup”. **All patients DO NOT need all the tests and are only necessary when the doctor considers them.** The stage of disease at diagnosis may determine the best treatment options, the sequence of the required treatment and the prognosis.
- For breast cancer, there are **five stages** designated with Roman numerals 0 to IV. Generally, the lower the stage, the better the prognosis. The TNM staging system considers:
 - How big the cancer is, i.e., tumour size designated by (T)
 - Whether cancer has spread to lymph nodes (N)
 - Whether it has spread to distant sites, or metastases (M)
- Additional pathology features such as the receptor status (ER/PR and Her two neu) may also impact your cancer stage
- **Pathologic staging:** is determined after surgery (based on the lab report)

Are Grade and Stage the same?

Grading is different from stage. The grade will be a value between one and three and reflects the aggressiveness of tumour cells, the higher the grade, the more aggressive the tumour.

Based on the above, breast cancer is often classified as follows:

Early breast cancer (Stage 0-II)

- If the tumour has not spread beyond the breast or axillary lymph nodes

Locally-advanced breast cancer (stage III)

- If cancer has spread from the breast to nearby tissue or lymph nodes
- Depending on how far cancer has spread, locally advanced tumours may be either operable or inoperable.
- In most patients, locally advanced breast cancer treatment starts with systemic therapy, i.e., chemotherapy or hormonal therapy, called Neoadjuvant therapy.
- Locally advanced breast cancer has not spread to other organs.

Metastatic Breast Cancer (Stage IV)



- Breast cancer has spread beyond the breast and axillary lymph nodes to other organs in the body (most often to the bones, lungs, liver, or brain).
- Metastatic breast cancer is not a specific type of breast cancer but rather the most advanced stage of breast cancer.
- Breast cancer, when metastatic, is not curable but is still treatable, and patients may live for several years with ongoing treatment.
- Many patients delay seeking care in Pakistan and ignore some of the warning signs and thus may already have stage IV disease when they first get diagnosed.

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