

Understanding Breast Cancer

A Guide for Patients/Families



What is Breast Cancer?

In a healthy body, natural systems maintain a balance between the creation, growth and death of cells. These systems may become abnormal, leading to excessive cell growth mass of tissue (lump) we call a malignant tumor or cancer. When this process takes place in the breast, it is called breast cancer.

How Common Is Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer is most common in women over 50 years of age, but may occur in younger women, and occasionally in men as well. Breast cancer is a leading cause of cancer-related deaths in women, with almost 1.7 million cases diagnosed per year. One in every eight women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime.

What are the Risk Factors for Developing Breast Cancer?

- Doesn't make sense.
- Other risk factors include:
 - Increasing age.
 - Having no children.
 - Genetic predisposition (abnormal gene) or a family history of cancer. Only 30% of breast cancer patients have a family history.
 - History of any abnormal finding on a breast biopsy.
 - Obesity.
 - More than one alcoholic drink per day.
 - Radiation is given to treat certain cancers such as lymphoma
 - Use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

It is imperative to remember that.

- Having a risk factor increases cancer development, but it does not mean that you are at risk of getting cancer.
- Likewise, not having a risk factor (such as no family history) does not mean that you are at risk of getting cancer.
- Breastfeeding may decrease the risk, but may not prevent breast cancer.

How does Breast Cancer Spread?

Cancer starts from the breast. The cancer cells can travel from the breast to other parts of the body through the bloodstream or the lymphatic system. The lymph nodes in the underarm area (the axillary lymph nodes) are the first place that the cancer is likely to spread. In advanced stages, cancer cells. Breast cancer is repetitive may spread to other parts of the body like the liver, lungs, bones and brain, in a process called metastasis or spread.

What are Different Types of Breast Cancer

The two basic types of breast cancer are:

1. Non-invasive Breast Cancer

Non-invasive breast cancer (also known as ductal carcinoma in situ or DCIS) occurs when abnormal cancer cells start to grow inside the milk ducts/tubes and have not broken through the walls of these tubes to spread to nearby tissue or beyond. This may also be referred to as "pre-invasive breast carcinoma." If left untreated, it can develop into invasive breast cancer.


2. Invasive Breast Cancer


Invasive breast cancer is when abnormal cells break through the walls of the milk ducts or lobules into the nearby breast tissue. It also can spread to the lymph nodes as well as other parts of the body.



What is the treatment for breast cancer?

Breast cancer is treated using a multidisciplinary approach. The entire treatment may last for several months and may include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy or targeted therapy. These treatments are given in addition to surgery to help kill any non-visible cancer that might still be in the body. These cancer cells may not even be detectable by blood tests or imaging studies (X-rays, CT scans etc.). The decision to incorporate other modalities for treatment, depends on the tumor type, stage, patient's age and overall health.

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