

# Metastatic Breast Cancer: What You Need to Know



Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be scary. Learning that it has spread (metastasized) to other parts of the body can be even more upsetting.

Researchers keep working on new treatments for metastatic breast cancer. Even though these can't cure metastatic breast cancer, they can help manage it, sometimes for years.

If you have been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, your healthcare team is there to support you.

## When breast cancer spreads

In its early stages, breast cancer is only in the breast. Metastatic breast cancer is different. It is called stage IV cancer. Cancer cells from the breast have spread and grown tumors in other parts of your body. This most often includes your bones, lungs, liver, or brain. These growths are still breast cancer. The new tumors are made up of breast cancer cells.

Metastatic breast cancer can happen if you have an early-stage breast cancer that grows. Or stage IV breast cancer may be your first diagnosis.

Healthcare providers can diagnose metastatic breast cancer with these:

- Imaging tests like a CT scan, MRI, or PET scan
- Tissue samples (biopsies) checked in a lab
- Blood tests

## Know the symptoms

Your symptoms depend on where the cancer has spread. Some common signs may include:

- Bone pain or fractures
- Shortness of breath
- Lasting cough
- Abdominal pain or swelling
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes)
- Severe headaches or seizures
- Vision problems
- Confusion
- Nausea or vomiting
- Unexplained weight loss or loss of appetite

It's important to pay attention to your body. Tell your healthcare team about any new or worse symptoms. Finding cancer early can help your team manage it better. Ask your healthcare team what symptoms to watch for and when to report them.

## Understanding treatment options

There is no cure for metastatic breast cancer. But treatment can help control it, manage symptoms, and improve your quality of life.

Your treatment plan depends on the cancer's subtype, location, and your overall health. Some common treatment options include:

- **Hormone therapy.** This treatment is used for hormone receptor-positive breast cancers. It helps block the ability of cancer cells to use hormones to grow.
- **Chemotherapy (chemo).** This is medicine given by mouth or by IV (intravenous) line into a vein. It uses powerful medicines to kill or slow the growth of cancer cells. Chemo can be used alone or with other treatments.
- **Targeted therapy.** These are medicines that target cancer cells with certain genetic mutations or proteins. This helps to block their growth and spread with less harm to healthy cells.
- **Immunotherapy.** This treatment uses the body's immune system to find and attack cancer cells.
- **Radiation therapy.** This can relieve pain and control the spread of cancer in some parts of the body. It uses high-energy X-rays or other particles to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors.
- **Surgery.** In some cases, surgery may be advised to remove tumors or ease symptoms caused by cancer growth.

Be honest when you talk with your healthcare team. Make sure you fully understand your treatment options. This will help you make informed decisions about your care.

## Research and clinical trials

Researchers are working to improve treatments. You can ask your cancer care provider about clinical trials. A clinical trial is a research study to test new treatments. You may have access to a new treatment when you join a study. Ask about the benefits and risks of a clinical trial for you.

## Getting support

Living with metastatic breast cancer can be challenging. But you don't have to face this on your own. There is a community of people ready to support you.

You may deal with feelings like anxiety, sadness, anger, or hopelessness. But remember that many people who have it lead active lives.

Support groups and counseling can help you with your emotions. They can help you connect with others who have similar experiences. Ask your healthcare team for advice. They may recommend support groups online, in your area, or in your treatment center. There may be groups just for people with metastatic breast cancer.

Ask your healthcare team who else you can talk to in your cancer care facility. There may be people to help you with stress, nutrition, financial questions, and other needs. This may include any of these:

- Counselor
- Social worker
- Navigator
- Case manager
- Dietitian
- Palliative care specialist
- Chaplain

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