



# Breast Cancer Information for Patients and Families

*This document is a plain-language summary based on BC Cancer patient education materials (January 2022). It is meant to help you understand breast cancer and does not replace medical advice from your health-care team.*

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## 1. What Is Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer is cancer that starts in the breast tissue. The breast is made up of fatty tissue, milk-producing glands (lobules), and small tubes (ducts) that carry milk to the nipple. Most breast cancers begin in the ducts or lobules.

Breast cancer can affect people of all genders. Although it is much more common in women, breast cancer can also occur in men. Finding breast cancer early greatly improves the chance of successful treatment.

Sometimes cancer spreads to the breast from another part of the body. This is **not** breast cancer — it is called metastatic cancer to the breast.

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## 2. Breast Lumps and Breast Changes

Most breast lumps are **not cancer**. In fact, up to 9 out of 10 breast lumps are benign (non-cancerous). Hormonal changes can cause breasts to feel tender, lumpy, or swollen, especially before a menstrual period.

You should talk to a doctor or nurse practitioner if you notice:

- A new lump or thickening in the breast or under the arm

- A lump that grows or does not go away
- Changes in breast size or shape
- Dimpling, puckering, redness, or swelling of the breast skin
- Changes to the nipple, such as turning inward or scaling
- Bloody or watery nipple discharge

Painful lumps are less likely to be cancer, but **any persistent change should be checked**.

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## 3. How Is Breast Cancer Diagnosed?

Several tests may be used to check for breast cancer:

- **Mammogram:** A specialized X-ray of the breast



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- **Ultrasound:** Helps determine if a lump is solid or fluid-filled
- **MRI:** Sometimes used to get more detailed images
- **Biopsy:** A small sample of tissue is removed and examined under a microscope

A biopsy is the only way to confirm breast cancer. If cancer is found, additional tests are done to see whether hormones (estrogen or progesterone) or a protein called HER2 are helping the cancer grow. These results help guide treatment decisions.

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## 4. Types of Breast Cancer

Breast cancers are described as **non-invasive** or **invasive**.

- **Non-invasive breast cancer:** Cancer cells are contained within ducts or lobules
  - *Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS)* is common, very treatable, and often curable
- **Invasive breast cancer:** Cancer cells have spread into surrounding breast tissue
  - *Invasive ductal carcinoma* is the most common type
  - *Invasive lobular carcinoma* is the second most common

There are also rare types of breast cancer, including inflammatory breast cancer and Paget's disease of the nipple.

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## 5. What Does “Stage” Mean?

Staging describes how much cancer is in the body and whether it has spread.

- **Stage 0:** Non-invasive cancer (DCIS or LCIS)
- **Stage I:** Small tumor, no spread to lymph nodes
- **Stage II:** Larger tumor and/or nearby lymph nodes involved
- **Stage III:** Large tumor or many lymph nodes involved
- **Stage IV:** Cancer has spread to other parts of the body

The stage helps your health-care team plan treatment and discuss prognosis.



## 6. Treatment Options

Treatment depends on the type and stage of cancer, test results, and your overall health.

### Surgery

- **Lumpectomy:** Removes the tumor while keeping the breast
- **Mastectomy:** Removes the entire breast
- **Lymph node surgery:** Checks whether cancer has spread

### Radiation Therapy

Radiation uses high-energy X-rays to kill cancer cells. It is often given after lumpectomy and sometimes after mastectomy.

### Systemic Therapy

These treatments affect the whole body and may include:

- Chemotherapy
- Hormone therapy (such as tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors)
- Treatments that lower or block estrogen

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## 7. Side Effects and Recovery

After treatment, some people experience:

- Pain or stiffness in the arm or shoulder
- Numbness under the arm
- Fatigue
- Swelling of the arm (lymphedema)

Exercises, physiotherapy, and early movement can help recovery. Your care team can help manage side effects.

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## 8. Follow-Up After Treatment

Regular follow-up appointments are important after treatment. These visits may include physical exams, mammograms, and monitoring for side effects or recurrence.

Over time, your follow-up care may be shared between your cancer specialists and your family doctor.

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## 9. Risk Factors for Breast Cancer

Risk factors include: - Increasing age

- Family history of breast cancer
- Certain inherited gene mutations (such as BRCA1 or BRCA2)
- Long-term exposure to estrogen
- Being overweight or obese
- Alcohol use
- Previous radiation to the chest

Many people with breast cancer have **no clear risk factors**.

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## 10. Prevention and Screening

You may lower your risk by: - Maintaining a healthy weight

- Staying physically active
- Limiting alcohol
- Eating a balanced diet
- Avoiding smoking

### Screening

- **Mammograms** are recommended regularly starting at age 40
  - **MRI screening** may be used for people at very high genetic risk
  - Being familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel can help you notice changes early
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## 11. Support and Resources

A breast cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming. Support is available for both medical and emotional needs. Your health-care team can help connect you with education, counseling, and survivorship resources.

If you have questions or concerns, speak with your care team — they are there to help.