

# ASCO ANSWERS

## BREAST CANCER

### WHAT IS BREAST CANCER?

Breast cancer is a disease in which normal cells in the breast begin to change, grow without control, and no longer die, forming a mass of cells called a tumor. Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in women in the United States.

### WHAT ARE THE PARTS OF THE BREAST?

The breast is mostly fatty tissue. It contains a network of lobes made up of tiny, tube-like structures called lobules that contain milk glands.

Tiny ducts connect the glands, lobules, and lobes, and carry the milk from the lobes to the nipple.

About 90% of all breast cancers originate in the ducts or lobes of the breast.

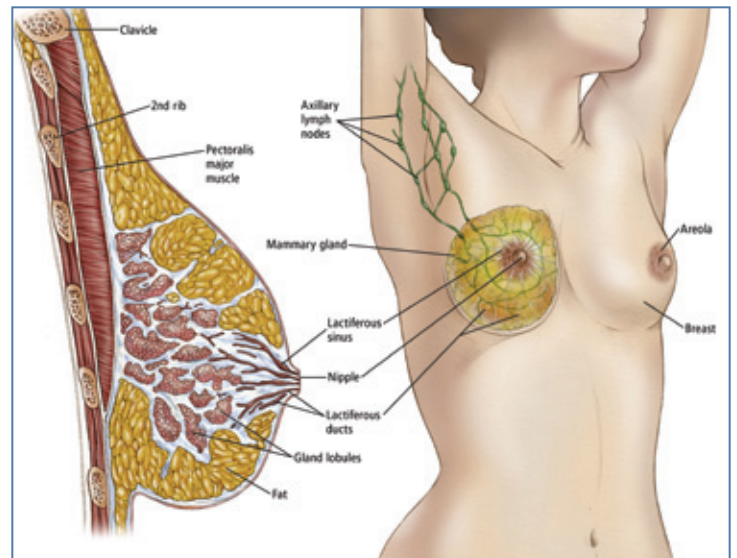


Illustration by Robert Morneau/Visual Explanations, LLC. © 2004 American Society of Clinical Oncology.

*Find additional cancer information at [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net).*

### WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing the cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and if it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. There are five stages for breast cancer: stage 0 (zero), which is non-invasive DCIS, and stages I through IV (one through four). Illustrations for these stages are available at [www.cancer.net/breast](http://www.cancer.net/breast).

### HOW IS BREAST CANCER TREATED?

Not all breast cancer is the same. The biology of the breast cancer affects its behavior and treatment. The factors considered in a person's treatment include the stage and grade (how different the cancer cells look from healthy cells) of the cancer; the tumor's hormone receptor status (estrogen receptor [ER] and progesterone receptor [PR]) and human epidermal growth factor receptor-2 (HER2) status; the genetic description of the tumor, the presence of known mutations (changes) to breast cancer genes; and the woman's age, general health, and menopausal status. For cancer that is not advanced, surgery to remove the tumor and nearby lymph nodes usually is the first treatment. Additional treatment may be given to lower the risk of the cancer returning. This includes radiation therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy, and/or hormonal therapy. The treatment of cancer that has spread or come back after treatment depends on many factors and includes any of the therapies listed here. When making treatment decisions, women may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of breast cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team.

### HOW CAN I COPE WITH BREAST CANCER?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the breast cancer?
- Has cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
- What is the hormonal status of the tumor? The HER2 status? What does this mean?
- Would you explain my treatment options? What clinical trials are open to me?
- How will this treatment benefit me?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- If I'm worried about the cost related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at [www.cancer.net/breast](http://www.cancer.net/breast).

*The ideas and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) or The ASCO Cancer Foundation. The information in this fact sheet is not intended as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed health care provider. Patients with health care-related questions should call or see their physician or other health care provider promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information encountered on the website. The mention of any product, service, or treatment in this fact sheet should not be construed as an ASCO endorsement. ASCO is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of or related to any use of ASCO's patient education materials, or to any errors or omissions.*

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website,  
[www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net), or call 888-651-3038.**

**Cancer.Net™** 

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

## TERMS TO KNOW

### Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

### Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

### Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

### DCIS:

Ductal carcinoma in situ; cancer has not spread past the ducts

### Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

### Lumpectomy:

The removal of the tumor and area around the tumor

### Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

### Mastectomy:

The removal of the entire breast

### Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

### Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

### Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

### Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

### Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue