



Patient Information

Battling Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is diagnosed when cancerous cells are detected in the tissues of the breast. The risk of developing the disease has increased dramatically over the past few decades. Today, it's the most common cancer among women, with one in eight expected to be diagnosed in her lifetime. Although a predominantly female disease, breast cancer can develop in men as well. In fact, approximately 1,600 men are expected to be diagnosed with the disease this year.

How do I know if I'm at risk?

If you have an immediate family member (for example, your mother or sister) who was diagnosed with breast cancer, you have a higher risk of developing it yourself—though 85% of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no family history of it. Risk is also higher among women who had their first period before the age of 12, began menopause after the age of 55, had their first child after age 30, or never had children.

Your chances of developing breast cancer increase as you get older—particularly as you pass the age of 50. They're also greater if you have received radiation therapy to your chest as treatment for another type of cancer, used birth control pills for more than 10 years, or taken *progestin* (pro-**jest**-in) to treat menopausal symptoms. (Talk to your doctor about other options for relieving symptoms of meno-

pause or preventing pregnancy over the long term.)

Eating fatty foods or drinking more than two alcoholic beverages a day can raise your risk, whereas daily exercise and a healthy, low fat diet can reduce it. Although cigarette smoking isn't proven to be linked to breast cancer, it affects overall health and puts people at risk for many other cancers, as well as heart disease.

What are the warning signs?

One sign of breast cancer is a lump in your breast. Usually it is a single lump that feels hard or firm and doesn't hurt. But take note of any unusual appearance in your breast—for example, if the skin on your breast or underarm swells, if the veins right beneath the surface of your skin become more prominent on one breast than on the other, or if an area of your breast becomes dimpled or appears sunken. Any of these could be early signs of breast cancer. Changes to your nipple might also indicate a problem. Contact your doctor right away if it becomes inverted, develops a rash or discharge, or changes color or texture.

What tests do I need?

A series of tests and procedures can help your doctor confirm or rule out breast cancer. First, an X-ray of the breast, called a *mammogram* (**mam**-uh-gram), may be taken so that any changes in the breast

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tissue can be seen more clearly. If the mammogram reveals any suspicious tissue, your doctor may want to collect a small sample using a needle or remove the tissue through surgery. If cancer is found, numerous tests will be performed to determine what kind of cancer it is, what stage it's in (that is, how large it is and whether it has spread to other body parts), and what types of treatments would be most effective in fighting it. These tests may include some that examine your bones, liver, or lungs—areas to which breast cancer commonly spreads.

How can I avoid the problem?

With breast cancer, early detection is key to successful treatment. To find the disease early, you must check your breasts for changes periodically. If something seems abnormal, see your doctor. The National Breast Cancer Foundation recommends that women start performing monthly breast self-exams at age 20. To find out how, visit the foundation's web site (www.nationalbreastcancer.org) and click on "Early Detection."

You should also have your breasts examined by a doctor or nurse at least once every three years until the age of 39—and then once a year after that. Generally, women age 40 and older should have yearly mammograms unless they're pregnant or breastfeeding. Mammograms can detect cancer up to two years before it can be felt in a breast self-exam.

How is it treated?

If you're diagnosed with breast cancer, the best treatment for you will depend on your

age, your general health, your breast size, and the stage at which your cancer was detected. In the earliest stage of breast cancer, the abnormal cells haven't spread beyond the duct or lobe in which they were found. In the later stages, the cancer has spread to surrounding areas.

If your breast cancer is detected at an early stage, your doctor may suggest that you have surgery to remove the "lump" of cancerous cells—a procedure called a *lumpectomy* (lum-pek-tuh-mee). If the lump is too big, you may require a *mastectomy* (ma-stek-tuh-mee), in which the entire breast is surgically removed. (Often, this type of surgery can be followed by "reconstructive" surgery, which returns the breast's appearance to normal.)

After surgery, you may require radiation therapy to the breast or underarm area. Radiation therapy can be delivered by a machine that's outside the body or by a sealed radioactive substance that's placed directly on or near the cancer.

In addition, many people are treated with *chemotherapy* (key-mo-ther-uh-pee) or hormonal therapy. Chemotherapy uses drugs that are either swallowed or injected into a vein to stop the cancer from growing. Hormone therapy uses drugs, surgery, or radiation to block hormones that cause certain cancers to grow. These therapies may be used before surgery to reduce the lump size or afterward to prevent the cancer from returning.

More information on these and other treatments, as well as current clinical trials, medical updates, and support programs can be found on the web site of the American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org). ●

