After a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

American Cancer Society®
Every cancer. Every life.®

Breast cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the breast. The breast is an organ that sits on top of the upper ribs and chest muscles. In women, the breast makes and delivers milk to feed newborns and infants. If you have been told you have breast cancer, you've probably already had a mammogram, other scans, and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests might have been done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes called biomarkers. You might also have other procedures to find out if the cancer has spread. These tests help your doctor know what type of breast cancer you have, what stage it is, and what treatment might help.

Treatment for breast cancer

Your treatment will depend on the type and stage of your breast cancer. Your treatment options will also depend on the results of the tests on the cancer cells, your health, if you have gone through menopause, and your personal preferences.

Surgery is the main treatment for most types of breast cancer. This involves removing the cancer along with a part of the normal breast. Surgery to remove part of the breast is called a lumpectomy. Surgery to remove the entire breast is called a mastectomy.

Other treatment can include radiation therapy and medicines such as chemotherapy (chemo), hormone therapy, targeted therapy, and immunotherapy. In many cases, more than one type of treatment is needed. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

Some treatments can cause changes in menstrual periods. Your periods might stop, even if you haven't gone through menopause. These treatments could affect your ability to get pregnant, but there may be ways to protect your fertility. Talk with your doctor early, before treatment starts. They can help you understand what to expect.

Be sure to ask:

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- What stage is my breast cancer, and what does that mean? What were the biomarker test results?
- What else have you learned from my test results?
- Will I need more tests?
- What is the goal of treatment?
- Will I need surgery? Can the cancer be removed completely?
- Do I need genetic testing?

What to expect before and during treatment

Your cancer care team will explain your treatment plan. This team may include different doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers, depending on the type of treatment you need. For example, if you need surgery, you will work with a surgeon. They will tell you what to expect before, during, and after surgery. If you need other types of treatment, your cancer care team will explain how it is given, help you get ready for it, keep track of how you're doing, and help you with any side effects. You might also get blood tests, x-rays, or scans at certain times to see how well your treatment is working.

Not everyone going through treatment for breast cancer will have the same side effects. For example, the side effects of surgery are different from the side effects of chemo, hormone therapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or radiation therapy. And people getting the same treatment might have different side effects.

Be sure to ask:

- What are my treatment options? What do you think is best for me and why?
- Are there any clinical trials for my type of cancer?
- What side effects might I have, and what can I do about them?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment? How long will it last?
- Where will I go to get treatment? Can I drive myself?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work and exercise?
- Will I be able to have children after treatment?
- Will the treatment affect my sex life? If so, how and for how long? What can I do to help this?

What to expect after treatment

After treatment, ask your cancer doctor for a treatment summary and follow-up plan. This is called a survivorship care plan. Your cancer doctor will work with your family or primary care doctor to help manage side effects from treatment and check your general health. You will have regular tests to check if your cancer has come back, or to check if a new cancer has started in a different part of your body.

For some people, the cancer might not go away completely. They might continue to get treatment, and tests will still be needed to see how well it's working.

You might be faced with changes to your body after treatment. You might have lost all or part of a breast after surgery or have skin changes from radiation. You might be at risk for swelling of your hand or arm if your lymph nodes were removed during surgery or damaged from radiation. You may have sexual changes as a result of treatment. Ask your doctor what to expect, and let them know if you have any problems.

It is important to know that taking menopausal hormone therapy, also called hormone replacement therapy or HRT, may not be recommended for some women who have had breast cancer. If you are bothered by menopause symptoms, talk with your doctor about ways to help get relief.

People who have had breast cancer are at risk for having it again or getting certain other types of cancers. Even if you feel fine after finishing treatment, it's important to ask your cancer care team about a regular schedule for follow-up tests to check if your breast cancer has come back.

Be sure to ask:

- Where do I get a copy of my treatment summary and follow-up plan?
- How often do I need to see my cancer care team?
- When and how should I contact them?
- Will I need tests to see if my cancer has come back, or to check for problems from my treatment?
- Do I need any screening tests, like a colonoscopy, to find other cancers early?
- Are there late or long-term side effects from treatment that I should watch for?
- Where can I find my medical records after treatment?

Staying healthy

Be sure to tell your doctor or cancer care team if any treatment side effects don't go away or if you have any new symptoms.

There are things you can do to keep yourself healthy during and after treatment. Not smoking may help reduce your chances of breast cancer. Getting to and staying at a healthy weight, eating well, drinking enough fluids, being active, and avoiding alcohol can also help you stay healthy. These things can help lower your risk of getting a new breast cancer or other cancers.

Dealing with your feelings

Having breast cancer might make you feel scared, sad, or nervous. It's normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope with them.

- Don't try to deal with your feelings by yourself. Talk about your feelings, no matter what they are.
- It's OK to feel sad or down once in a while, but let your cancer care team know if you have these feelings for more than a few days.
- If your doctor says it's OK, do things you enjoy like spending time outdoors, going to a movie or sporting event, or going out to dinner.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.

You might want to reach out to friends, family, or religious leaders or groups. Counseling can also help. Some people find it helpful to talk with others who've been through the same things. A support group can offer that. Tell your cancer care team how you're feeling. They can help you find the right support.

For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at **cancer.org/breastcancer** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

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