

Metastatic Breast Cancer

What is metastatic breast cancer?

Metastatic [met-ah-STAH-tic] breast cancer (also called Stage IV or Advanced) is a stage of breast cancer in which cancer cells break away from the tumor in the breast, spread to other parts of the body and keep growing. When someone is diagnosed with breast cancer, tests are done to check for signs of metastatic disease. Of all metastatic breast cancer cases in the U.S., most are recurrences. The most common sites for metastasis are the lung, liver, bones and brain.

Getting support

Learning you have metastatic breast cancer can be devastating. It is normal to feel fear, shock, sadness, anger and depression. You do not have to face this alone. Studies have shown that staying positive can improve your quality of life. Getting support from co-survivors, such as family, friends, health care providers or colleagues who are there to lend support from diagnosis through treatment and beyond can help.

Treatment goals

Women with advanced breast cancer have a lower 5-year survival rate than women with breast cancer at earlier stages. They can still lead active and fulfilling lives. The focus of treatment is on managing metastatic breast cancer as a chronic disease. The main goals are to prolong life and to reduce symptoms to maintain quality of life.

Your treatment options depend on:

- the size and location of the metastases
- certain features of the tumor cells
- your age and general health
- the types of treatment you may have had in the past
- your current symptoms

Talk to your doctor about your treatment choices, what he or she would recommend and why, and the side effects of each treatment.

You may also want to think about taking part in a clinical trial. Some new treatments are only available through a clinical trial. Also, taking part can help researchers learn more about breast cancer and how to treat it. There are many things to think about when making this decision. Your doctor can help you weigh the pros and cons of being part of a clinical trial.

Types of treatment

Hormone therapy — Women whose tumors have positive hormone receptors (ER+) may benefit from hormone therapy. Hormone therapy works to shrink tumors throughout the body. This treatment has fewer side effects than chemotherapy and the benefits often last longer. Even if you have taken tamoxifen or another hormone therapy, you still may be able to try a different hormone drug.

Chemotherapy — When hormone therapy is not an option, the first treatment is usually chemotherapy. This treatment can stop the growth of a tumor, kill cancer cells that have spread to other parts of the body and reduce breast cancer symptoms. It is possible to treat recurrences of breast cancer with a different drug or combination of drugs, even if chemotherapy was used in the past.

Targeted therapy — These treatments are used to target cancer cells with certain features. One approved therapy is trastuzumab (Herceptin). This is used in people with tumor cells that are HER2-positive.

Radiation therapy — Radiation therapy is given to relieve pain or other symptoms caused by metastatic disease. It may also be given to reduce the size of a tumor in order to reduce symptoms. It is often used for bone metastases.

Surgery — Surgery is rarely used to treat metastatic breast cancer. This is because cancer cells are no longer in one place, making the cancer hard to remove surgically. Like radiation therapy, surgery may be used to reduce the size of a tumor and ease symptoms.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common concern for those with advanced breast cancer. Eating a healthy diet, getting plenty of rest and exercise can all help relieve fatigue. To manage your day-to-day activities, reduce your commitments and ask for help from friends and family. There are also drugs that may help relieve fatigue.

Steps to manage pain

One of the biggest fears of people with advanced breast cancer is that they will be in a lot of pain. Pain can almost always be managed. Some ways to manage pain include medication, relaxation techniques and self-hypnosis.

1. Keep a record.

Because pain cannot be seen, it is hard to measure and describe. Keep a journal of your pain to help tell your doctor what you are feeling. Be sure to note:

- where the pain is located
- when the pain appears
- the nature of the pain
- how long the pain lasts
- what eases the pain

2. Tell your doctor.

Pain can make you feel depressed or irritable. It affects your quality of life and it can also cause your relationships with others to suffer. Tell your doctor about what you are feeling. It gives him or her the chance to help you.

3. Ask for a referral.

Managing pain can sometimes be complex. Each person reacts differently to treatment. If you are not getting good pain control, ask your doctor about adding a pain specialist to your team.

Stay Positive

If you have been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer you have an important choice to make. Only you can choose how you will face this challenge. Those with metastatic breast cancer can and do live active and fulfilling lives. Staying positive is important to quality of life. It may help to keep a journal of your fears, concerns and questions to discuss with your doctor. Whatever you decide, seek out the resources and support you need to live your life to the fullest.

Stopping treatment

At some point the side effects of treating metastatic breast cancer may outweigh the benefits. You may consider stopping treatment to focus on palliative care. Palliative care, also called comfort care, provides relief from symptoms and pain management. The goal is to provide comfort and maintain the highest possible quality of life for as long as life remains. Only you can make this decision. Talk with your doctor and family about your thoughts and fears, and ask them to support the choice that you make.

Resources

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

Breast Cancer[™] Network of Strength
1-800-221-2141 (English) or 1-800-986-9505 (Spanish)
www.networkofstrength.org

National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN)
1-888-909-NCCN
www.nccn.org

Living Beyond Breast Cancer
1-888-753-5222
www.lbbs.org

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- Clinical Trials
- End-of-life Care
- If Breast Cancer Returns
- Prognostic Factors