

Types of Breast Cancer Tumors

What are the types of breast cancer tumors?

Breast cancers tumors are classified as *non-invasive* or *invasive*. Most breast cancer occurs in the ducts of the breast — the tubes that carry breast milk to the nipple. This breast cancer is called *ductal carcinoma*. A second, but less common form of breast cancer occurs in the lobules — where breast milk is made. This breast cancer is called *lobular carcinoma*.

Non-invasive

Non-invasive breast cancer is an abnormal growth of cells still within the area in which it started. These cancer cells have not invaded into surrounding breast tissue. Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) is a non-invasive breast cancer and referred to as stage 0. In situ [in SY-too] means “in place.” Although DCIS and lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS) sound similar, LCIS is not considered breast cancer. LCIS is a risk factor for breast cancer.

Invasive cancer

When breast cancer cells spread into surrounding breast tissue from the ducts or lobules, the cancer is called invasive. This increases the chance for cancer cells to spread to the lymph nodes. Inflammatory breast cancer (IBC) and Paget’s disease of the nipple are two rare types of invasive breast cancer. Other less common forms of invasive breast cancer are medullary, mucinous, papillary and tubular carcinoma. Invasive breast cancer is not the same as metastasis.

- **Metastatic** — Metastasis [mə-tās'tă-sis] occurs when breast cancer cells break away from the breast tumor and spread to other organs of the body through either the blood stream or the lymphatic system.

What is meant by the size and spread of breast cancer?

In addition to the type of breast cancer tumors — non-invasive or invasive — doctors also look at characteristics such as the size and spread of the tumor.

Size

In general, but not always, the smaller the tumor, the better the chance for successful treatment. Doctors define small as less than 2 centimeters or about three-fourths of an inch.

Spread

Doctors describe the spread of breast cancer as either local, regional or distant. *Local* means that the breast cancer is confined within the breast. Even if breast cancer is found in several different locations in the breast, it is still considered local. *Regional* means that the breast cancer has spread to the lymph nodes, mainly those in the underarm (the axillary nodes). *Distant* means that the breast cancer has spread to other organs of the body (metastasized).

Why does it matter?

The size and spread of breast cancer are important characteristics in determining the stage of breast cancer. The stage determines the prognosis (expected outcome) and treatment options. The other side of this fact sheet describes the five stages of breast cancer.

Breast cancer staging

This scale is used by doctors to rate the stage of advancement of breast cancer. The stages are 0, I, II, III and IV. The higher the stage, the more serious the cancer. Stage depends on: the size of the tumor in the breast (T); if cancer has spread to the axillary lymph nodes (N); and any sign of metastasis (M). This is called TNM staging. The table below gives a summary of TNM staging. Stage 0 (zero) refers to ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS). Stages I-IV are all invasive cancer.

Stage	(T) Tumor Size	(N) Axillary lymph nodes	(M) Metastasis
Non-invasive			
0	tiny cluster of cancer cells in a breast duct (in situ); no invasive cancer seen	no spread	none
Invasive			
I	up to 2 cm	no spread	none
II	smaller than 2 cm	has spread to axillary lymph nodes	none
	between 2 and 5 cm	may or may not have spread to the axillary lymph nodes	none
	larger than 5 cm	no spread	none
III	any size	has spread to the axillary lymph nodes so that the nodes become attached to each other	none
	larger than 5 cm	has spread to axillary lymph nodes	none
	any size, but cells have spread to skin or chest wall	may or may not have spread to the axillary lymph nodes	none
	any size	has spread to lymph nodes along breastbone or above or below collarbone	none
Metastatic			
IV	any size	may or may not have spread to the axillary lymph nodes	has spread to other organs of the body

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Ductal Carcinoma in Situ
- Inflammatory Breast Cancer
- Metastatic Breast Cancer
- Paget's Disease of the Nipple
- Prognostic Factors
- What is Breast Cancer?