

FACTS FOR LIFE

When the Diagnosis is Cancer — An Overview

Now what?

Anyone who has ever had cancer remembers what it felt like hearing the words, “You have breast cancer.” You may feel angry, afraid, cheated, overwhelmed and uncertain about the future. But in time you learn you can take back control of your life. Your medical team, family and friends (co-survivors) can help you through the process. Here’s how:

STEP 1: Planning your journey

Your doctor reviewed your pathology report and made a diagnosis of breast cancer. The same report will be used to determine your prognosis (expected outcome) and to suggest a course of treatment. Making this plan is the first step in the process of healing.

You can get copies of all your medical records, including your pathology report. You may want to look at these records with your doctor so that he or she can translate the technical information for you. Your medical records will also be helpful in case you seek a second opinion. This will help you become a more informed consumer and patient. After all, *you* will make the final decisions about what is best for you.

STEP 2: Making treatment decisions

Today, doctors have many treatment options to offer. There are two main types of breast cancer treatment: *local* and *systemic*. Local treatment includes procedures involving only the breast and surrounding tissue. These include surgery and radiation therapy. Surgeries can preserve most of the breast (lumpectomy) or can remove the entire breast (mastectomy). Axillary (under the arm) lymph nodes may also be removed during surgery for testing to see if cancer cells are present.



*Your co-survivors
(family and friends)
can help you
through the
process of living
with breast cancer.*

Systemic treatment reaches cancer cells that are throughout the body. It includes treatments like chemotherapy, hormone and targeted therapy. Local and systemic treatments are often used together to provide the best chance for recovery.

For women who have a mastectomy, breast reconstruction is another option. This surgery may be done at the same time as the mastectomy or later. For some women, having reconstructive surgery helps them feel good about themselves and improves their emotional health. Be sure you talk to your doctors, family members and other people who have had this procedure before you make your final decision.

Your doctor may suggest several treatment options based on your type of cancer. Consider each option carefully. Do not rush into a decision if you are still not sure. Ask questions. Discuss your concerns. Consider your priorities. The more facts you have, the more likely you will make an informed decision.

STEP 3: Knowing what to expect

Once you have made your treatment decision, but *before* you actually begin, find out what you can expect during treatment. For example, you will probably have blood tests and a chest X-ray before having surgery. Also, most treatments have some side effects. For every treatment that your doctor recommends, ask what side effects are common, how long they will last and what can be done to prevent or treat them. Many medications are available that can help. Remember that most side effects go away after the treatment ends. Ask your doctor about what to expect.

STEP 4: Dealing with treatment

Depending on the type, treatment can last months to five years (hormone therapy). During this time, you'll have doctor's visits, exams, medications and lab tests. Remember to take care of yourself during treatment. Eat well, stay physically active and get plenty of sleep. Join a support group to talk to others who are going through the same treatment as you. A program called Look Good...Feel BetterSM teaches beauty techniques for those in cancer treatment. Contact the American Cancer Society to find out more about this program.

During treatment, you may also have pain which can be treated. There are many different medicines to help relieve the pain. It is important to talk with your doctor about what type of pain you feel, where you feel it, what helps ease the pain and how your current pain medication helps.

Nausea is a common side effect of chemotherapy. Today, nausea and vomiting can be treated with anti-nausea drugs. Sometimes the drugs are given before chemotherapy to prevent nausea from occurring. If you have any questions or are concerned about nausea, talk to your doctor.

Cancer-related fatigue varies from person to person. Discussing symptoms with your doctor is the first step in relieving fatigue. Your doctor may suggest keeping a fatigue diary, planning activities for times when your energy level is highest, taking short naps and breaks, aerobic exercise to prevent fatigue and eating small

meals or snacks. A support group may be helpful during this time as well.

After your treatment ends, focus your energies on beginning the physical, emotional and spiritual course of healing. Keep all your follow-up appointments, and maintain open communication with your doctor.

Who should I tell about my breast cancer?

It is really up to you. Start with the people you feel most comfortable around. Take your time and wait until you are ready.

Resources

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636),
www.komen.org
Questions to Ask the Doctor,
www.komen.org/questions

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

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

CancerCare®
1-800-813-HOPE, www.cancercare.org

National Cancer Institute's Cancer
Information Service
1-800-4-CANCER, www.cancer.gov

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Making Treatment Decisions
- Talking With Your Doctor
- Treatment Choices — An Overview