

Inflammatory Breast Cancer

What is inflammatory breast cancer?

Inflammatory breast cancer (IBC) is rare and the most aggressive form of breast cancer. It is called inflammatory breast cancer because its main symptoms are swelling and redness of the breast. Unlike other forms of breast cancer, IBC often lacks a distinct lump or tumor. Instead, cells grow in sheets that spread through the breast. IBC is not usually found by mammograms or ultrasounds unless there is a defined lump. If no lump is present, it can be hard to diagnose. Because IBC cells spread easily to other parts of the body, it requires prompt diagnosis and treatment.

Who is at risk?

IBC accounts for about one to five percent of all breast cancer cases in the United States. The average age at diagnosis in the U.S. is younger for both Caucasian and African American women.¹

- It is slightly more common in African American women. As many as ten percent of new breast cancer cases in African American women are IBC, compared to six percent of breast cancer cases in Caucasians and five percent of other races.
- It is more common in younger women than other forms of breast cancer. It has been seen in women who are pregnant and in women who are breastfeeding.
- Like other forms of breast cancer, it has also been seen in men.

¹ Merajver SD, Sabel MS. Inflammatory breast cancer in Harris JR, Lippman M, Morrow M and Osborne C. Diseases of the breast Philad Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2004.

Symptoms of inflammatory breast cancer

There are many symptoms of inflammatory breast cancer. It is important to see your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- one breast becomes much larger than the other one (often sudden)
- warmth and swelling in the breast (often sudden)
- redness or pinkness that may look like an infection
- itching or pain in the breast that won't go away
- dimpling of the skin that may look like the skin of an orange (called peau d' orange)
- ridges or thickened areas of skin
- nipple discharge
- nipple retraction or flattening
- change in the color of the areola (the dark skin around the nipple)
- a bruise that does not go away
- swollen lymph nodes on the neck or under the arm
- a lump (although often there is no lump)



Photo courtesy the Inflammatory Breast Cancer Research Foundation

Enlarged right breast with nipple retraction. Peau d' orange on underside of breast not visible in the photo above is shown in the next photo.



Photo courtesy the Inflammatory Breast Cancer Research Foundation

Peau d'orange on underside of breast, not visible when standing. The small irregular red spot at the 11 o'clock position in this photo is the scar remaining from a skin biopsy, not a symptom of inflammatory breast cancer.

The symptoms of IBC are not always the same. It is often misdiagnosed as a breast infection. Any of these symptoms may be a sign of either IBC or a benign breast infection (not cancer). If the symptoms last longer than a week after starting antibiotics, insist that your doctor do a biopsy to see if cancer cells are present. If you do not feel that your doctor listens to your concerns, get a second opinion.

Treatment for inflammatory breast cancer

Treatment for inflammatory breast cancer often starts with several rounds of chemotherapy, hormone therapy or both. These systemic treatments affect the whole body. They are used to kill or control any cancer cells that might have spread to other parts of the body. Then local treatments, such as radiation therapy and surgery, are used to target the remaining cancer cells in the breast and under the arm. Sometimes systemic treatments are used again after the local treatments. Systemic treatments used at follow-up may include chemotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy.

If you have been diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer, know that there is hope. Advances in the treatment of breast cancer have improved the 5-year survival rates of women with IBC and new research is ongoing. Staying positive is vital to your quality of life. Ask your doctor about sources of help and support in your area.

Resources

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

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

IBC Research Foundation
1-877-STOP-IBC
www.ibcresearch.org

National Cancer Institute
1-800-4-CANCER
www.cancer.gov

Young Survival Coalition®
1-877-YSC-1011
www.youngsurvival.org

Internet

IBC Support
www.ibcsupport.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Biopsy
- Treatment Choices — An Overview
- Types of Breast Cancer
- What is Breast Cancer

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast health and breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen for the Cure does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.

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