

Many say facing cancer the first time was one of the hardest things they've ever had to do. There were new things to learn and many tests and treatments to go through. When breast cancer returns (called a recurrence), you might know what to expect but that doesn't mean it's easy.

Those who have a breast cancer recurrence often feel angry and afraid. It doesn't seem fair the cancer they fought so hard to get rid of came back. Some second-guess the treatment choices they made. Remember, you made the decisions that were right for you at the time. There is likely nothing more you could have done. Women may also wonder if they have the strength to go through it all again. If you have had these thoughts, you are not alone.

It may be helpful to find a support group for women who have had a breast cancer recurrence. Never give up hope. You and your doctor will make a plan to treat your cancer.

While it may be hard at first, continue to live your life as you wish. Try to find the energy to do the things that make you happy. Talk to others about how they can help you live well each day.

Types of breast cancer recurrence

Local recurrence is the return of cancer to the breast, chest wall or lymph nodes. Breast cancer can also return and spread to other parts of the body (called metastasis or distant recurrence). The risk of either type of recurrence varies from person to person and depends on the original breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.



How is a recurrence found?

- Local recurrence is usually found during a mammogram or a physical exam, or when you notice a change.
- Metastasis is usually found when symptoms are noticed and reported during follow-up doctor visits.

Your breast cancer is less likely to recur if:

- You had no or few cancerous lymph nodes found during surgery.
- Your breast cancer was found early and was small.

A new treatment plan

Learn as much as you can

Find out as much as you can about the recurrence. The location and characteristics of the tumor may be different from your original breast cancer. This will help you consider your treatment options.

Don't face this alone

There may be difficult choices to make. A family member or friend (co-survivor) can support you and help you weigh your options. Ask them to help take notes at doctor appointments, gather medical records and make sure you understand your treatment options. You don't have to face this alone.

Pick your medical team

You may want to use the same medical team you had before. However, it's important to get a second opinion. Another doctor may have a different insight on your diagnosis and treatment options.

Choose your treatment goal

The location and extent of the recurrence will affect your treatment goals. If you have a local recurrence, your treatment will aim to get rid of the cancer with some combination of surgery, radiation therapy (if it wasn't part of your initial treatment), chemotherapy, targeted therapy and/or hormone therapy.

If metastasis is present, tests are done to see which organs are involved and to learn about the characteristics of the tumor. Talk with your doctor about treatment goals and options.

Second primary tumor

A second primary breast tumor is a new breast cancer, not related to your first breast cancer (not a recurrence). It develops in a different location from the original breast cancer (for example, in the opposite breast) and may have different characteristics.



Resources

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

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

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

Related fact sheets in this series:

- End-of-life Care
- Metastatic Breast Cancer
- Support After A Breast Cancer Diagnosis

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