

Learn all you can

Take time to learn all you can about your breast cancer and your treatment options. Don't let anyone pressure you into making a decision before you are ready.

Talk with your doctor and make a plan. Bring a friend or family member with you to appointments.

Don't be afraid to get a second opinion.

Types of treatment

Treatment for breast cancer includes some combination of surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy and/or targeted therapy. The goal of treating breast cancer is to remove the cancer and keep it from returning.

Types of Surgery

Surgery may be a lumpectomy (also called breast conserving surgery) or a mastectomy. With either type of breast surgery, some lymph nodes in the underarm area (axillary nodes) may be removed and checked to see if they contain cancer.

Lumpectomy removes the tumor and some normal tissue around the tumor. The general shape of the breast and the nipple area are preserved.

Mastectomy removes the entire breast.

Overall survival with lumpectomy plus radiation therapy is the same as with mastectomy.

Side effects from either surgery can include pain, numbness and lymphedema if lymph nodes were removed. Lymphedema is a fluid build-up that causes swelling in the arm, hand or other areas.



Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy uses high energy X-rays to kill cancer cells that may be left after surgery. This lowers the chances of recurrence.

Radiation is almost always given after lumpectomy and sometimes after mastectomy.

Side effects such as fatigue may begin within a few weeks of starting treatment and go away after it ends. During treatment, the treated breast may be rough to the touch, red (like a sunburn), swollen and sore.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy uses drugs to kill cancer cells throughout the body. It is often given in cycles over 3-6 months, with days or weeks off between treatments. This gives your body a chance to recover. The schedule depends on the combination of drugs.

Short-term side effects can include hair loss, nausea and vomiting, fingernail and toenail weakness, mouth sores, fatigue and lowered blood cell counts.

Long-term side effects can include early menopause, weight gain and problems with memory and concentration (sometimes called “chemo-brain”).

Hormone therapy

Hormone therapy drugs slow or stop the growth of hormone receptor-positive tumors by preventing the cancer cells from getting the hormones they need to grow. Tamoxifen and aromatase inhibitors are drugs taken in pill form every day for 5-10 years. Hormone therapy with ovarian suppression uses drug therapy or surgery to prevent the ovaries from making estrogen.

Side effects most often include menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes (and with aromatase inhibitors, joint and muscle aches).

Targeted therapy

Targeted therapy drugs kill cancer cells with certain markers or proteins. Trastuzumab (Herceptin), for example, treats HER2-positive breast cancers. It is given through an IV every 3 weeks for 1 year.

Side effects can include heart problems but most people who develop a heart problem improve after stopping the drug.

Complete your treatment plan

People who complete their treatment plan have a higher chance of survival than those who don't. This is why it's important to follow the treatment plan for medications and other therapies prescribed by your doctor.

If you have any side effects, tell your doctor right away. He/she may be able to treat your symptoms or change your treatment plan to ease symptoms.

Is a clinical trial right for me?

A clinical trial is a research study. Volunteering for a clinical trial offers the chance to try a new breast

cancer treatment and possibly benefit from it. You could also help others someday.

It's important to ask your doctor if a clinical trial is a good option for you.

BreastCancerTrials.org in collaboration with Susan G. Komen offers a custom matching service to help you find a clinical trial that fits your needs.

Resources

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

Komen Treatment Assistance Fund
1-800-813-4673
www.cancercares.org

National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service
1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)
www.cancer.gov

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship
1-877-NCCS-YES (1-877-622-7937)
www.canceradvocacy.org

The Patient Advocate Foundation, Co-Pay Relief
1-866-512-3861
www.copays.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Reconstruction & Prosthesis After Mastectomy
- Clinical Trials
- Complementary and Integrative Therapies
- Treatment Choices for Early Breast Cancer

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