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Comprehensive Cancer Information for Patients, Families and Medical Professionals Printed from CancerHelp®

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Breast Cancer 02/03

-- General Information About Breast Cancer --

Breast cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the breast.

The breast is made up of lobes and ducts. Each breast has 15 to 20 sections called lobes, which have many smaller sections called lobules. Lobules end in dozens of tiny bulbs that can produce milk. The lobes, lobules, and bulbs are linked by thin tubes called ducts.

Each breast also contains blood vessels and lymph vessels. The lymph vessels carry an almost colorless fluid called lymph. Lymph vessels lead to organs called lymph nodes. Lymph nodes are small bean-shaped structures that are found throughout the body. They filter substances in lymph and help fight infection and disease. Clusters of lymph nodes are

found near the breast in the axilla (under the arm), above the collarbone, and in the chest.

The most common type of breast cancer is ductal carcinoma, which begins in the cells of the ducts. Cancer that begins in the lobes or lobules is called lobular carcinoma and is more often found in both breasts than are other types of breast cancer. Inflammatory breast cancer is an uncommon type of breast cancer in which the breast is warm, red, and swollen.

Age and health history can affect the risk of developing breast cancer.

Risk factors include the following:

- * A family or personal history of breast cancer.
- * Never having given birth.
- * Menstruating at an early age.
- * Older age.

Breast cancer is sometimes caused by inherited gene mutations (changes).

The genes in cells carry the hereditary information that is received from a person's parents. Hereditary breast cancer makes up approximately 5% to 10% of all breast cancer. Some altered genes related to breast cancer are more common in certain ethnic groups.

Women who have an altered gene related to breast cancer and who have had breast cancer in one breast have an increased risk of developing breast cancer in the other breast. These women also have an increased risk of developing ovarian cancer, and may have an increased risk of developing other cancers. Men who have an altered gene related to breast cancer also have an increased risk of developing this disease. (For more information, refer to the PDQ summary on Male Breast Cancer.)

Tests have been developed that can detect altered genes. These genetic tests are sometimes done for members of families with a high risk of cancer. (Refer to the PDQ summaries on Screening for Breast Cancer,

Prevention of Breast Cancer, and Genetics of Breast and Ovarian Cancer for more information.)

Tests that examine the breasts are used to detect (find) and diagnose breast cancer.

A doctor should be seen if changes in the breast are noticed. The following tests and procedures may be used:

- * **Mammogram:** An x-ray of the breast that may find tumors that are too small to feel.

- * **Biopsy:** The removal of cells, tissues, or fluid to view under a microscope and check for signs of disease. If a lump in the breast is found, the doctor may need to cut out a small piece of the lump and look at it under the microscope to see if there are any cancer cells. Four types of biopsies are as follows:

- * **Excisional biopsy:** The removal of an entire tumor or lesion.
- * **Incisional biopsy:** The removal of part of the tumor or lesion.
- * **Core biopsy:** The removal of a sample of tissue with a wide needle.
- * **Needle biopsy or fine-needle aspiration biopsy:** The removal of a sample of tissue or fluid with a very thin needle.

- * **Estrogen and progesterone receptor tests:** If cancer is found, these tests may tell whether estrogen and progesterone (hormones) affect the way the cancer grows. These tests may also give information about the chances of the tumor recurring (coming back). The test results show whether hormone therapy is likely to stop the cancer from growing. To perform these tests, tissue from the tumor is examined in the laboratory, usually at the time of biopsy.

Certain factors affect treatment options and prognosis (chance of recovery).

The treatment options and prognosis (chance of recovery) depend on the stage of the cancer (whether it is in the breast only or has spread to other places in the body), the type of breast cancer, certain characteristics of the

cancer cells, and whether the cancer is found in the other breast. A woman's age, menopausal status (whether a woman is still having menstrual periods), and general health can also affect treatment options and prognosis.

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