

# Understanding Breast Cancer



Finding out that you have breast cancer can be confusing. With everything that you are going through, it may be difficult to absorb all of the information from your healthcare team. It is important to understand breast cancer so that you can fight the disease.

## What is cancer?

Cancer is a general term that refers to cells that grow and multiply out of control. Cancer can cause harm in different ways. Cancer cells take nutrition and space away from normal cells. A lump of cancer cells, also known as a “tumor,” can attack or destroy normal tissue.

Cancer cells can also spread from one part of the body to another. This is called **metastasis**.

## What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a common cancer among women (second only to skin cancer), with an estimated 182,460 women being diagnosed in the United States in 2008.

Most breast cancer begins in the milk ducts. These ducts connect the milk-making glands, or “lobules,” to the nipple. Some breast cancer begins in the lobules themselves, and the rest begins in other tissues.

## What are the stages of breast cancer?

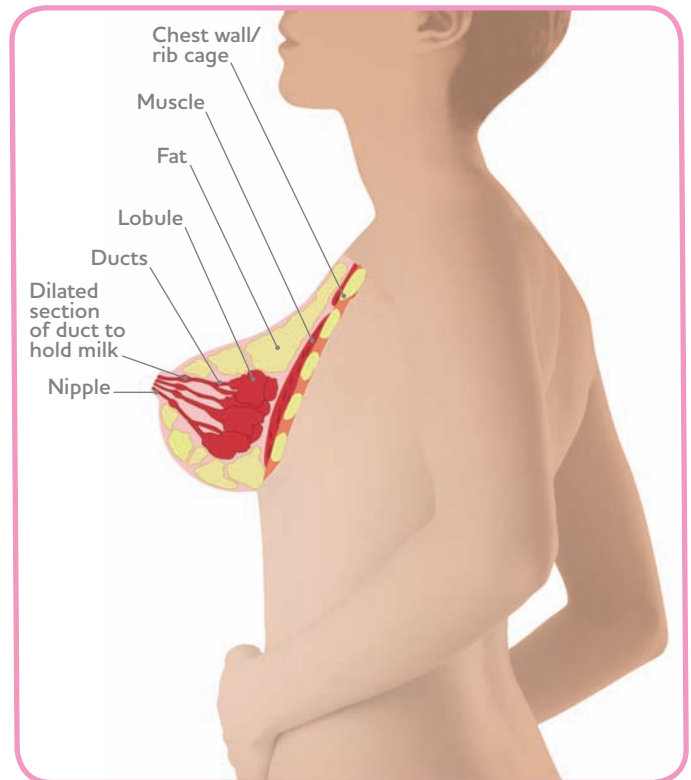
A cancer’s **stage** refers to how much the cancer has grown and where it has spread. The most common staging method groups breast cancer into 5 stages, from stage 0 to stage 4, based on the size of the tumor and whether it has spread to the **lymph nodes** (small masses of tissue throughout your body that help to fight infection) or other parts of the body.

In addition, you may also hear your doctor describe your breast cancer as **noninvasive** or **invasive**.

**Noninvasive** breast cancer, or **carcinoma in situ**, has not spread beyond the ducts or the lobules, depending on where it started. **Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS)** is cancer that is confined to the ducts, whereas **lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)** is a condition that is confined to the lobules, or milk-making glands. Although LCIS is not considered a true cancer, having it may increase the risk of getting breast cancer later.

**Invasive** breast cancer, in contrast, has spread beyond where it began. There are several degrees of invasiveness in breast cancer:

- **Localized** breast cancer is still only within the breast
- **Regionally advanced** breast cancer has spread to the tissue surrounding the breast or there are cancer cells within nearby lymph nodes. The more lymph nodes with cancer, the more serious the cancer may be
- **Distant (advanced/metastatic)** breast cancer has spread away from the breast to other tissues in the body, such as the lungs, liver, bone, or brain



There are many types of breast cancer. Each may require a different treatment. Hormone-receptor status and HER2 status of the breast cancer are very important because they may determine the type of treatment you are likely to receive.

### What is hormone-receptor–positive breast cancer?

Normal female hormones such as estrogen and progesterone can play a role in the growth of many types of breast cancer, so it is important to know whether the cells in your breast cancer have “receptors” for either of these hormones. Breast cancer that has **estrogen receptors** is called estrogen-receptor positive, or “ER+,” and breast cancer that has **progesterone receptors** is called progesterone-receptor positive, or “PR+.” Breast cancers that are ER+ and/or PR+ may benefit from hormonal therapy.

### What is HER2-positive breast cancer?

HER2 status is another important breast cancer characteristic. **HER2+ breast cancer** cells have more HER2 receptors than normal breast cells. This is thought to cause these cells to grow and divide more quickly, which is why HER2+ breast cancer is considered aggressive.

HER2 status and hormone-receptor status are not the same thing, and being positive for one does not mean the cancer is positive for the other. You may have one, both, or neither type of these cancers. Your healthcare team can give you more information about your breast cancer and help you to decide what treatments are right for you.

### What are the potential treatment options for HER2-positive breast cancer?

Treatment for this type of cancer may include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and hormonal therapy. Also, HER2+ breast cancer may benefit from “targeted therapy” that specifically blocks the effects of HER2.

### Where can I find more information about breast cancer?

You have a dedicated team of healthcare professionals that can give you information and support throughout the course of your treatment. You should feel free to ask your doctor or nurse any questions you have about your cancer or your treatment plan. In addition, here are a few Web sites where you can find additional information about breast cancer and treatment options:

- [www.breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org)
- [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)
- [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- [www.networkofstrength.org](http://www.networkofstrength.org)

### NOTES:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---