



FREQUENTLY ASKED
QUESTIONS ABOUT
ADVANCED
BREAST CANCER

How is breast cancer staged?

Breast cancer is divided into five main stages, 0 through 4.

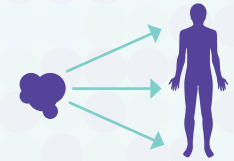
The stages are based on:



the size of
the tumor



the number of lymph
nodes involved



how much the
cancer has spread

When breast cancer spreads or becomes worse, this is known as

PROGRESSION

The American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) developed a widely-used system to stage breast cancer. Using this system, Stages 0-2 are early forms of the disease.

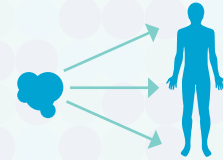
Advanced breast cancer includes the most serious of the five possible stages, Stages 3 and 4:

- **Stage 3** is locally advanced breast cancer, meaning the cancer has spread to lymph nodes and/or other tissue in the breast, but not to further sites in the body
- **Stage 4** is metastatic breast cancer. At this stage, the cancer has spread to other sites of the body, such as the liver, lungs, bones, brain, and/or others

What is metastasis and how does it happen?

METASTASIS

means the spread of cancer to other parts of the body



Metastasis happens when **cancer cells break away from a primary tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system** (the system that produces, stores and carries the cells that fight infections).

When cancer cells spread and form a new tumor in a different organ, the new tumor is a **metastatic tumor**, the cells of which come from the original tumor. This means, for example, that if breast cancer spreads to the lungs, the metastatic tumor in the lung is made up of cancerous breast cells (not lung cells). In this case, the disease in the lungs is metastatic breast cancer (not lung cancer).

The most common sites of metastasis from solid breast cancer tumors are the **lungs, bones and liver**. Cancer can spread to other parts of the body, too.

Under a microscope, metastatic breast cancer cells generally look the same as the cancer cells in the breast, so you should **consult an oncologist** who specializes in the treatment of breast cancer regardless of where the cancer has spread.



How does a doctor know whether a cancer is a primary or a metastatic tumor?

PATHOLOGIST

is a doctor who identifies diseases by studying cells and tissues under a microscope



To determine if a tumor is **primary** or **metastatic**, a pathologist examines a sample of the tumor. In general, cancer cells look like abnormal versions of cells in the tissue where the cancer first appeared. Using specialized diagnostic tests, a pathologist is often able to tell where the cancer cells came from.

Doctors may determine the primary site of cancer in a few ways. They may look for:

- **Markers**, which are a diagnostic indication that the disease may develop or
- **Antigens**, substances that cause the immune system to have a specific immune response

Metastatic cancer may be found before or at the same time as the primary tumor, or months or years later. When a new tumor is found in a patient who has been treated for cancer in the past, it is often a metastasis versus another primary tumor.

Some people with metastatic cancer do not have symptoms. Their metastases may be found by tests, which may be performed for other reasons such as:



X-rays



Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

Computed tomography (CT scan)

Positron emission tomography (PET scan)

What are the symptoms of metastatic cancer?

When symptoms do occur, the type and frequency **depend on the size and location of the metastasis**. For example, cancer that spreads to the bones is likely to cause pain and can lead to bone fractures. Shortness of breath may be a sign of lung involvement.

Sometimes a person's primary cancer is discovered only after the metastatic tumor causes symptoms when spreading to that body organ.

RECURRENCE

is the return of cancer after treatment and after a period of time during which the cancer cannot be detected

Almost everyone who has had cancer fears that one day the cancer will come back, or recur. The following sites help explain what is happening when someone has a recurrence, how you are likely to feel about it and how you might approach the challenge ahead.

Dealing with Cancer Recurrence

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)

Recurrent and Metastatic Breast Cancer

Breastcancer.org

What is a recurrence?

Glossary of Breast Cancer Terminology

Cancer.org

Guide to Understanding Treatment Decisions

Living Beyond Breast Cancer (LBBC)

HER2 Status

Breastcancer.org

Hormone Receptor Status

Breastcancer.org

Metastatic Navigator: A Young Woman's Guide to Living with Metastatic Breast Cancer

Young Survival Coalition (YSC)

Understanding your Pathology Report

Living Beyond Breast Cancer (LBBC)

What is MBC?

Metastatic Breast Cancer Network (MBCN)

Your Guide to Secondary Breast Cancer

Breast Cancer Now

Additional information

American Cancer Society. How is Breast Cancer Staged? <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/breastcancer/detailedguide/breast-cancer-staging>. Accessed August 1, 2016.

American Cancer Society. Breast Cancer. <http://www.cancer.org/acs/groups/cid/documents/webcontent/003090-pdf.pdf>. Accessed August 1, 2016.

Sources