

After a diagnosis of breast cancer



After finding out you have breast cancer, you may feel shocked, upset, anxious or confused. These are normal responses. It may be helpful to talk about your treatment options with your doctor, family and friends. Seek as much information as you feel you need. It is up to you how involved you want to be in making decisions about your treatment.

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer in Australian women after skin cancer. Each year over 12,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia. Although rare, breast cancer can also affect men.

Early breast cancer can be treated successfully and for most women breast cancer will not come back after treatment.

How is breast cancer treated?

A number of different health care professionals may be involved in your treatment and care. The type of treatment offered will depend on your situation and the type of breast cancer you have. Treatment that is best for one woman may not be suitable for another.

Although nearly all treatments have side-effects, most can be effectively managed. Ask your doctor to explain what side-effects to expect and how best to manage them.

Surgery involves either breast conserving surgery or a mastectomy. Breast conserving surgery removes the breast cancer and a small area of healthy tissue around it. This procedure can also be called a lumpectomy, wide local excision or complete local excision. Breast conserving surgery plus radiation therapy is as effective as mastectomy for most women diagnosed with early breast cancer.

A mastectomy involves the removal of the whole breast affected by cancer. If you are considering breast reconstruction you should discuss this with your doctor before your surgery.

In most cases breast surgery also involves the removal of one or more lymph nodes in the armpit, to test whether the breast cancer cells have spread.

Radiation therapy uses x-rays to destroy cancer cells that may be left in your breast or breast tissue after surgery. You may experience some pain or discomfort after each treatment, although the treatment itself is painless. Radiation therapy does not make you radioactive and does not cause hair loss. It is usually given over a five to six week period. Radiation therapy can also be used to reduce the size of the cancer and to relieve pain or other symptoms.

Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs to help destroy cancer cells that may have spread to other areas of your body, but cannot be detected. Some chemotherapy drugs come in tablet form, others are injected through a vein in the arm or hand.

Chemotherapy reduces the chance of the cancer coming back. It may be used in addition to surgery and radiation therapy.

Hormone treatment may be used if there are hormone receptors on your cancer cells. Hormonal therapy can help destroy remaining breast cancer cells, or any cancer cells that may have spread to other areas of your body but cannot be detected.

Hormonal therapy may be used in addition to surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

Diet therapy, or eating a healthy diet including a variety of foods, will ensure you have what your body needs to cope with treatment and recovery. Be sure to discuss your diet with your dietician and doctor.

Exercise therapy can improve your cancer recovery. Research has shown that regular physical activity is beneficial and can reduce side-effects such as fatigue. Talk to your physiotherapist or exercise physiologist and doctor.

What about my physical and emotional wellness?

- Don't be afraid to ask for professional and emotional support.
- Consider joining a cancer support group.
- Learn to ignore unwanted advice and 'horror stories'.
- Live day-to-day and remember that every day is likely to be different.

Complementary therapies can work alongside medical treatments and some have been shown to improve quality of life or reduce pain. There is no evidence that these therapies can cure or prevent cancer. It is important to remember that some of these therapies have not been tested for side-effects, may work against other medical treatments and may be expensive. Let your doctor know about all complementary therapies you are thinking of using.

Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Australia website

(with links to state and territory Cancer Councils).

www.cancer.org.au

National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre

www.nbocc.org.au

Breast Cancer Network Australia

1800 500 258

www.bcna.org.au

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