What You Need to Know About Stage 4 Breast Cancer

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What Is Stage 4 Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer is classed as stage 4 when it has spread beyond the breast to other parts of the body such as bones, brain or organs.

Also known as advanced, secondary or metastatic breast cancer, it is still called breast cancer even if it is found in other parts of the body as it is made up from breast cancer cells.

The cells have traveled through the body through lymph nodes or the bloodstream which have then attached and grown into new tumors.

Symptoms of Stage 4 Breast Cancer

Symptoms will vary depending on where the stage 4 cancer has spread to and can vary from person to person.

If any symptom is experienced for more than three weeks, it would be suggested to contact your health care team or primary physician for further investigation.

Bone pain and tenderness can be a sign that it has spread to the bones. Headaches, seizures, dizziness or vision change could mean it has spread to the brain.

Breathlessness and a persistent cough could mean it is in the lungs and if it has spread to the liver, there could be a loss in appetite, change in urine color, bloated or sore abdomen, jaundice or pain in the right shoulder.

Treatment for Stage 4 Breast Cancer

Breast cancer treatment will differ depending on the type of breast cancer, where it has been discovered, the size of tumors and even the number of tumors.

The medical team will look at past treatments the patient has had, symptoms they might be suffering from and their general health to determine the new type of treatment.

While stage 4 breast cancer is no longer curable – it is treatable and manageable which is the aim of the various treatments. A treatment plan will be put in place to control and slow down the spread of the cancer, relieve symptoms and maintain health and well-being to give the best quality of life.

Treatment could be given in a combination of ways, and if one doesn’t or stops working, then there are others that can be looked at.

Surgery

It might be possible to operate and remove the new tumors or reduce them in size.

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy can be given to help reduce the pain and other symptoms when the cancer has spread to the bones or brain as it can be targeted to the area that the cancer has spread to.

Chemotherapy

Type of chemotherapy, frequency, and dosage can all vary depending on the type of breast cancer. Intravenous chemotherapy can be given the same as with primary breast cancer.

Some people may require chemotherapy for life which is likely to be in a tablet form and not have as harsh side effects as intravenous chemotherapies.

Hormone Therapy (Endocrine)

Some types of breast cancer are hormone receptors which means they can grow and react to hormones such as estrogen and progesterone.

Drugs have been developed to reduce the amount of hormones in the body.

Medication to prevent estrogen from stimulating breast cancer cell growth are Tamoxifen, Toremifene (Fareston) and Fulvestrant (Faslodex).

Aromatase inhibitors (AIs) can be used to reduce the amount of estrogen being produced by the body, and the most common of these are Letrozole (Femara), Anastrozole (Arimidex), Exemestane (Aromasin)

For pre-menopausal women, ovarian suppression might be required to reduce the amount of estrogen in the body. This can be done via injections, oophorectomy which is surgery to remove the ovaries, or even chemotherapy drugs can stop ovaries working.

Targeted Therapy (Biological)

Targeted therapies can be given alongside chemotherapy or hormone therapies the most common at the moment is Trastuzumab (Herceptin)

Bone-Strengthening Therapy

If the cancer has spread to the bones, then bone strengthening may be required. Bisphosphonates and denosumab can be used to strengthen the bones, which can reduce the amount of bone pain and risk of breakages.

Clinical Trials

Clinical trials are common in secondary breast cancer as little research has been done in the past and new and better treatments are being developed. If current treatments do not seem to be working, then a trial could be considered.

Tips for Coping with Stage 4 Breast Cancer

If you have recently been diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer, it can be difficult to swallow and cope with the news. Below, I have some tips that may help you cope with this stage of breast cancer:

Join an Online Community

Joining an online community with other people who have stage 4 cancer can be supportive. It is a place where you can ask questions to people who were going through similar treatments and even having similar thoughts and worries. These people do not know you personally so you can be as open as you want.

Be Careful What You Read on the Internet

Only research from reputable sources. There is so much information on the internet, and most of it does not all happen to be true. Use websites that have done their research, even though a lot of sources on the internet can be helpful if the information you are reading is untrue it could cause distress.

Remember Everyone Is Different

Even though in essence it is the same disease, it has different variants which will lead to different treatment, different side effects, and different outcomes.

Speak to Family and Friends

Speaking about your breast cancer diagnosis and treatment may help, don’t feel as though you have to bottle everything up. But you don’t have to tell them everything, and you will know how much you want people to know so don’t feel under pressure to disclose things you don’t want to.

Seek Professional Help

Getting diagnosed with stage 4 cancer is very daunting and can be very emotional. Speaking to a professional counselor may help, or even medication such as an anti-depressant might be required to help get the emotions under control.

At the end of the day, the medical team is there to help, and they should also be able to offer support and advice, so speak to them with any concerns worries or general questions.