What Are the Most Common Treatments for Breast Cancer?

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Your Breast Cancer Treatment Options

Did you know that breast cancer is the most common cancer in women?

Women in the U.S. have a lifetime risk of 1 in 8 of developing breast cancer, and every two minutes, a woman in the United States is diagnosed with breast cancer.

However, improvements in detection and treatment have reduced mortality rates related to breast cancer – between 1989-2015, we've seen a 39 percent decline.

Let's take a look at how breast cancer is treated.

Breast Cancer Treatment by Stage

The treatment plan typically depends on the stage of your cancer. You will likely have a biopsy to determine the stage so that your team can determine the best treatment plan for you.

According to the American Cancer Society, there are also other factors, independent of the stage, that are also important:

- Does your cancer have hormone receptors? For example, is it ER-positive or PR-positive?
- Does your cancer have large amounts of the HER2 protein?
- What is your general overall health?
- Have you already gone through menopause?
- How fast is the cancer growing?

Now, let's take a look at treatment based on the stages. Keep in mind that this is a generalized plan, as the above factors may sway the treatment plan:

- **Stage 0:** may require only observation, as it is typically precancerous. However, your physician will let you know if further treatment is required.
- **Stage I to III**: surgery to remove the cancer is typically recommended, as well as radiation. Chemotherapy and other drugs may also be recommended before and after surgery as well.
- **Stage IV (metastatic breast cancer):** as this type of breast cancer is systemic, and a systemic medication plan is involved.
- **Inflammatory breast cancer:** this type of cancer can be stage III or stage IV so that the treatment plan may vary. It can include surgery, chemo, radiation, and other systemic treatments.
- **Recurrent breast cancer**: this is breast cancer that recurs after prior treatment, so where the cancer recurs will dictate what type of treatment is required.
- **Triple-negative breast cancer**: this type of breast cancer is not receptive to drugs that HER2

medications. Generally, chemotherapy is the standard treatment. Clinical may be an option.

Breast Cancer Treatment Options

We've discussed briefly how breast cancer is treated, by stage. Let's take a look at the common types of breast cancer treatments that are used.

Breast Cancer Surgery

Surgery is typically the 'first line' treatment for breast cancer because it removes as much of the cancer as possible. There are also multiple types of breast cancer surgeries that can be performed, based on what is necessary for your type of cancer and your preferences.

- **A lumpectomy** removes only the tumor and a small amount of the surrounding tissue. It is also known as "breast-conserving surgery."
- **A mastectomy** removes the entire breast to ensure that all of the cancer is removed.

Chemotherapy for Breast Cancer

Chemotherapy, often shortened to 'chemo,' is a systemic treatment that affects the entire body – it circulates throughout the whole bloodstream. It is designed to weaken and destroy cancer cells at the original site, as well as cells that may have spread, and it can also weaken other cells.

Side effects of chemotherapy may include:

- Hair loss
- Anemia
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Neuropathy
- Taste and smell changes
- Infections
- Fatigue
- Mouth and throat sores

Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer

Radiation is a treatment that is often used after surgery. It uses a high-energy beam to damage cancer cells that may be left over after the tumor is removed. These radiation treatments must be repeated for several days (or even weeks) in order to damage the cells.

Radiation is typically well tolerated, and side effects are generally limited to the area that the radiation is targeted. Side effects of radiation may include:

- Skin burns – these may resemble a sunburn that is localized to the area of radiation
- Peeling of the skin
- Skin soreness

Typically, these side effects can be managed with treatments prescribed by your doctor.

Hormone Therapy for Breast Cancer

Hormonal therapy is only an effective treatment option with cancers that are hormone-receptor-positive. These work by affecting how estrogen affects the cancer, specifically the lowering how much estrogen is in the body and blocking the action in breast cancer cells.

Hormonal therapies include aromatase inhibitors, selective estrogen receptor modulators, and estrogen receptor downregulators.

Hormonal therapy to treat breast cancer is **not the same thing as hormone replacement therapy (HRT),** which is not used to treat breast cancer.

There are many side effects associated with hormonal therapy, but the "list" depends on what specific treatment is prescribed.

What Breast Cancer Treatment Is Right for You?

Breast cancer treatment is highly personalized based on many factors, such as the stage of cancer, the presence of hormone receptors and certain proteins, and general health.