

# MORE BREAST CANCER TREATMENT OPTIONS THAN EVER BEFORE

As soon as someone gets diagnosed with breast cancer, it can be hard to handle it at first. It can be a total life-changing experience. Not just being physically ill, breast cancer can also cause someone to go through mental illness for a long time. Everybody has their own journey from the treatment, to all the procedures and the trauma. One thing that can give strength and make people inspired is the willpower to fight off the disease, and seeing a life through a positive perspective.

If you have breast cancer, you have more treatment options than ever before. Some take less time, are safer, and are easier on your body. Others target the specific glitch in your cells that allows the cancer to survive or grow. But no matter which one you and your doctor choose, the goal is the same: get rid of the cancer so it doesn't come back.

## How Do I Choose the Right Treatment?

To start, you and your doctor will want to know:

- The type of breast cancer you have
- The size of your tumor and how far the cancer has spread in your body, called the stage of your disease
- How fast it will grow
- How likely the cancer is to spread or come back after treatment
- How well certain therapies will work for you
- Your age and how healthy you are
- The option you'd prefer

These details include your risk factors for the disease coming back or the chance to spread in your body; and will help your doctor recommend some treatments that could work well for you.

## What Are My Options?

The most common treatments for breast cancer are:

• **Surgery.** For most people, the first step is to take out the tumor. An operation called lumpectomy removes only the part of your breast that has cancer.

Sometimes it's called breast-conserving surgery. In a mastectomy, doctors remove the whole breast. Be sure to discuss the pros and cons of both types of surgery with your doctor. Often, removal of your whole breast does not work better or help you live longer.

• **Radiation.** This treatment uses high-energy waves to kill cancer cells. Most women under age 70 who have a lumpectomy get radiation, too. That helps destroy any cancer cells that the surgeon couldn't remove. Doctors also might recommend this method if the disease has spread. Radiation can come from a machine outside your body. Or you can get tiny seeds that give off radiation placed inside your breast where the tumor was.

In the past, people had radiation every day for many weeks. But it works just as well to get the same total amount of radiation in less time. It's also safer and causes fewer side effects. Ask your doctor if shorter therapy is an option for you.

• **Chemotherapy.** Chemotherapy is a treatment that uses anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. It works by interfering with the cancer cells' ability to divide and grow. Different chemotherapy drugs work in different ways and a combination of drugs is often used. During chemo, you take drugs as pills or through an IV to treat the disease throughout your body. Most people get it after surgery to kill any cancer cells left behind. Doctors also prescribe it before surgery to make tumors smaller. Chemo



DR Nevein Girgis

works well against cancer, but it also can harm healthy cells. This can cause side effects such as hair loss, mouth sores, and nausea. The benefit of chemotherapy might be clear for some people but less clear in other cases. You may be asked to decide if you want to have chemotherapy. The decision is a personal one and you'll need to weigh up the likely benefits against the potential side effects.

You can talk it through with your cancer specialist (oncologist), who can answer your questions and support you with your decision. Chemotherapy is commonly given as a series of treatments with a break between each treatment to give your body time to recover from any short-term side effects.

The treatment and period of time before the next one starts is called a cycle. You may have treatment weekly or every two or three weeks. You may have one drug or a combination of two or three drugs. The exact type and dose of chemotherapy will be tailored to your individual situation. The drugs used, the dose, how often they're given and the number of cycles may be called your chemotherapy regime or regimen.

• **Hormone therapy.** In some breast cancers, the hormones estrogen and progesterone can make cancer cells grow. This treatment blocks these hormones.

• **Targeted therapy.** These fight the changes in cells that lead to cancer. For instance, some cells have too much of a type of protein (receptors), which makes them grow too much. Drugs can block how these proteins work. Targeted treatments often have fewer side effects than those that affect the whole body, like chemo.

## Are There Side Effects?

Most breast cancer treatments cause side effects. Many, like nausea, go away when the therapy stops and can be easily prevented by getting proper strong pre-medications. But some may show up later. They're called late effects, and they include: Symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes, trouble getting pregnant, depression, trouble sleeping, changes in the way your breast looks, and trouble thinking clearly ("chemo brain").

## Diet and supplements

You may be able to eat normally throughout chemotherapy or your eating habits may change because of side effects. It's important to eat and drink what you feel able to, maintaining a healthy, well-balanced diet wherever possible. Tell your specialist about

any vitamin and mineral supplements you take or would like to start taking. The evidence is conflicting about how safe it is to take vitamin supplements, particularly high-dose antioxidants (including vitamins A, C and E, Co-enzyme Q10 and selenium), during chemotherapy.

Some studies suggest they might make the chemotherapy less effective, while other studies point towards them helping reduce chemotherapy side effects. Because the safety evidence is not clear many specialists recommend not taking high-dose antioxidant supplements during chemotherapy.

Finally, cancer is a battle where you have to be your closest friend so that you do not ever give up no matter how hard it gets. Keeping a positive outlook is proven to

help with stress management, but when someone says to "think positive" or "be optimistic" during a time such as cancer, it can be much easier said than done. We know that cancer isn't all rainbow and butterflies and once you enter a dark mindset, it can be hard to get out of it. That's the time you have to practice your faith, in His words there is hope and reassurance that no matter what circumstances we face, God is with us.

The Cancer Centre Bahamas at the Medical Pavilion Bahamas remains the only American College of Radiation Oncology (ACRO) accredited cancer centre outside of North America that provides for all of your cancer needsm screening diagnostic, medical, surgical, paediatric and radiation oncology treatment all under one roof.

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