



So many words...

There are so many new words to learn that relate to breast cancer. This fact sheet provides definitions for some words you may hear. You can use it to look up words you do not understand. You may even want to take it with you to your doctors' appointments.

Adjuvant (systemic) therapy

Treatment given after surgery and radiation to treat breast cancer that may have spread to other parts of the body. It may include chemotherapy, targeted therapy and/or hormone therapy.

Alternative therapy

Therapies used instead of standard treatments. They are different from integrative and complementary therapies, which are used in addition to standard treatments.

Axillary lymph nodes

Lymph nodes in the underarm area. Lymph nodes are small groups of immune cells that filter lymph fluid within the lymphatic system.

Aromatase inhibitor

Hormone therapy drugs that lower estrogen levels in the body by blocking aromatase, an enzyme that converts other hormones into estrogen. Aromatase inhibitors are used to treat postmenopausal women with hormone-receptor positive breast cancer.

Benign

Non-cancerous.

Biopsy

Removal of tissue or cells to be tested for cancer cells.

BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene mutation (Breast Cancer genes)

A mutation (change) in one gene can increase a person's risk of breast, ovarian and certain other cancers.

Breast Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

An imaging test that uses a magnet linked to a computer to make detailed pictures of soft tissues in the breast.

Chemotherapy

The use of drugs to kill cancer cells.

Clinical breast exam

A physical exam done by a health care provider to check the look and feel of the breasts and underarm for any lumps or changes.

Clinical trials

Research with people who volunteer to take part in a study. These studies usually test the benefits of possible new ways to prevent, detect, diagnose or treat disease.

Complementary therapies (integrative therapies)

Therapies (such as acupuncture or massage) used in addition to standard medical treatments. Complementary therapies are not used to treat cancer, but they may help improve quality of life and relieve some side effects of treatment or the cancer itself. When complementary therapies are combined with standard medical care, they are often called integrative therapies.

Cysts

Fluid-filled sacs that are almost always benign.

Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS)

A non-invasive breast cancer that begins in the milk ducts of the breast, but has not invaded nearby breast tissue. Also called stage 0 or pre-invasive breast carcinoma.

Estrogen

A female hormone produced by the ovaries and adrenal glands that is important to reproduction. Some cancers need estrogen to grow.

Fibrocystic condition (fibrocystic changes)

A general term used to describe a benign breast condition that may cause painful cysts or lumpy breasts.

HER2/neu

A protein that appears in high numbers on the surface of the breast cancer cells of about 15 to 20 percent of breast cancer tumors. Tumors with high levels of HER2/neu can be treated with the targeted therapy drug trastuzumab (Herceptin).

Hormone receptors

Specific proteins found on some cancer cells. Hormones in the body attach to these proteins. A high number of hormone receptors on a breast cancer cell often means that the cancer cell needs the hormone to grow.

Hormone therapy

Treatment that works by keeping cancer cells with hormone receptors from getting the hormones they need to grow.

Invasive breast cancer

Cancer that has spread from the original location (milk ducts or lobules) into the surrounding breast tissue and possibly into the lymph nodes. Invasive ductal cancer begins in the milk ducts. Invasive lobular cancer begins in the lobules of the breast.

Lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)

A condition where abnormal cells grow in the lobules of the breast. LCIS increases the risk of breast cancer.

Lumpectomy (breast conserving surgery)

Surgery that removes only part of the breast — the part containing and closely surrounding the tumor.

Lymphedema

Swelling due to poor draining of lymph fluid that can occur after surgery to remove lymph nodes or after radiation to the area. It most often occurs in the upper limbs (arm, hands, fingers), but can occur in other parts of the body.

Malignant

Cancerous.

Mammogram

An X-ray image of the breast.

Mastectomy

Surgical removal of the entire breast. Depending on the procedure, it may also include removal of the lining of the chest muscles and some of the lymph nodes in the underarm area.

Menopausal hormone use (menopausal hormone therapy; hormone replacement therapy)

The use of hormone pills that contain estrogen (with or without progesterin) to ease symptoms of menopause.

Metastasis

The spread of cancer from the breast to other parts of the body (most often the lungs, liver, bones or brain).

Neoadjuvant therapy

Chemotherapy or hormone therapy given before surgery to shrink a tumor.

Oncologist

A specialized doctor who treats people with cancer.

Palliative care

The combination of symptom and pain management therapies used to comfort and support those with a life-threatening illness.

Progesterone

A natural hormone made by the body that is important in menstrual cycles and pregnancy.

Progesterin

Any substance (laboratory-made or natural) that has some or all of the effects of progesterone in the body. It is used in birth control pills, menopausal hormone therapy and other types of hormone treatment.

Prognosis

The chance of recovery (survival).

Prosthesis (breast)

An artificial breast form that can be worn under clothing after a mastectomy.

Radiation therapy (radiotherapy)

Treatment using high energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells.

Reconstructive surgery (breast reconstruction)

Plastic surgery to restore the look and feel of the breast after mastectomy.

Recurrence (relapse)

Return of cancer. Local recurrence is the return of cancer to the same breast or the same side chest wall. Distant recurrence (metastasis) is the return of cancer that has spread to other parts of the body, such as the lungs, liver, bones or brain.

Risk factor

A factor that increases or decreases a person's chances of getting breast cancer.

Stages of cancer

A numbering system (from 0 to 4) that indicates the extent of cancer within the body. It is used to help determine treatment options and prognosis.

Targeted therapy

Drug therapies designed to attack specific molecular agents or pathways involved in the development of cancer.

Tumor

An abnormal growth or mass of tissue which may be benign or malignant.