



What is Breast Cancer?

Every day, cells in your body divide, grow and die in an orderly manner. Breast cancer is a disease where cells in the breast tissue grow and divide without normal control. This kind of growth of cells forms a mass or lump called a tumor. Tumors are either benign (not cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

Tumors in the breast tend to grow slowly. By the time a lump is large enough to feel, it may have been growing for as long as 10 years.

Non-invasive breast cancer

Describes a cancer that has not spread beyond the ducts or lobules where it began. Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) is a type of non-invasive breast cancer. DCIS occurs when abnormal cells grow inside the milk ducts, but have not spread to nearby tissue or beyond.

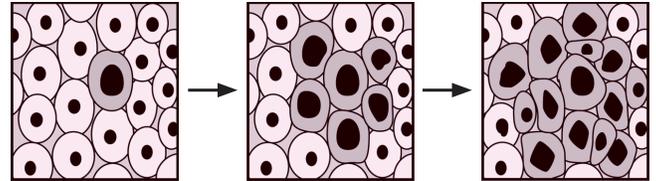
The term “in situ” means “in place.” Although the abnormal cells have not spread to tissues outside the ducts, they can develop into invasive breast cancer.

Invasive breast cancer

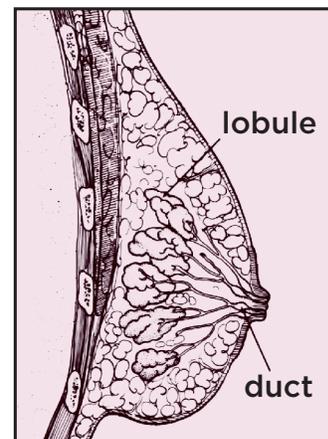
Occurs when abnormal cells from inside the milk ducts or lobules break out into nearby breast tissue. Cancer cells can travel from the breast to other parts of the body through the blood stream or the immune system. They may travel early in the process when the tumor is small or later when the tumor is large.

Breast cancer growth

The light circles show normal breast cells. The grey-shaded circles represent cancerous breast cells. As the cancerous cells grow and multiply, they form a malignant tumor within the breast.



Breast cancer can begin in the ducts or lobules of the breast.



How does breast cancer spread?

Breast cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body such as the liver, lungs, bones and brain. They can divide and grow out of control again and form other tumors. This process is called metastasis. Even though the new tumor is growing in another part of the body, it is still breast cancer.

How can gene mutations affect breast cancer?

We all have genes that control the way our cells divide and grow. When a change (called a mutation) occurs, the genes do not work like they should. Mutations may be spontaneous (occur on their own) or inherited (passed on from your mother or father). Spontaneous mutations account for 90 to 95 percent of breast cancer cases in the U.S. Inherited mutations account for only about five to ten percent of all breast cancer cases in the U.S. BRCA1 and BRCA2 (BReast CAncer genes 1 and 2) are the best-known genes linked to breast cancer risk.

Remember...

Cells can grow out of control before any symptoms of breast cancer appear. That is why breast cancer screening is important. Screening tests are used to find breast cancer before it causes signs or symptoms. Screening tests can find breast cancer early, when the chances of survival are highest. If you have a history of breast cancer in your family; talk with a doctor about your risk, when to start getting mammograms (or other tests) and how often to have them.

Know what is normal for you

The signs of breast cancer are not the same for all women. It is important to know how your breasts normally look and feel. If you notice any change, see a doctor.

Resource

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