

Metastatic Breast Cancer:

Terms You Should Know

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer (MBC) —breast cancer that has spread to another part of the body, such as the liver, brain, bones, or lungs — you'll likely encounter unfamiliar terminology when trying to learn about the disease.



Here are some key terms that can help you understand the diagnosis, treatments, and the experience of living with MBC.

»» Advanced-stage

Doctors think about breast cancer as being either early-stage or advanced-stage. Advanced-stage breast cancer includes:

- MBC, which has spread beyond the breast and nearby tissue to other parts of the body away from the breast
- locally advanced breast cancer, which has spread to tissue near the breast, but not to other parts of the body away from the breast

For specific stage numbers, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) defines early-stage breast cancer as stage I through stage IIIA, and advanced-stage as stage IIIB, stage IIIC and stage IV.

🧬 CDK4/6 inhibitors

Medicines used to treat MBC that is hormone-receptor-positive and HER2-negative. *The cyclin-dependent kinases 4 and 6* (CDK4/6) proteins control how quickly both healthy cells and cancer cells grow and divide. In MBC, these proteins can become overactive and cause the cells to grow and divide uncontrollably. CDK4/6 inhibitors interrupt these proteins to slow or even stop cancer cells from growing.



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Clinical trials

Research studies in which people agree to be treated with new medicines under careful supervision to help doctors identify effective treatments with the fewest side effects. All the recent advances in MBC treatment came about because of clinical trials. If you're interested in participating in a clinical trial, talk to your doctor to learn if there are trials that might be a good fit for you.

De novo

De novo means the first occurrence of cancer in the body. When someone is diagnosed with de novo MBC, it means the metastatic disease is the first diagnosis. De novo MBC is not a recurrence and the person was never diagnosed with early-stage disease.

Genetic testing

Tests that look for specific inherited mutations, or changes, in your genes that are linked to cancer. Knowing whether you have certain genetic mutations can affect your MBC treatment choices.

Hospice

Hospice is special care for people facing the end of life (typically within 6 months) and have stopped treatment to control or cure their disease. Hospice care focuses on improving quality of life by offering physical, emotional, social, and spiritual support to people with cancer and their families, with the goal of making the person as comfortable and alert as possible. Hospice care can be given at home or in a hospital or long-term care facility.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy medicines use your body's immune system to attack cancer cells. There are two main types of immunotherapy used to treat MBC: immune checkpoint inhibitors and immune targeted therapies.

Immune checkpoints are proteins in your body that help your immune system tell the difference between your own cells and foreign invaders, such as harmful bacteria. Cancer cells sometimes find ways to use these immune checkpoint proteins as a shield to avoid being identified and attacked by the immune system. Immune checkpoint inhibitors block these immune checkpoint proteins and help the immune system recognize and attack cancer cells.

Targeted therapies target specific characteristics of cancer cells, such as a protein that allows cancer cells to grow in a rapid or abnormal way. Some targeted therapies work like the antibodies made naturally by the immune system, and help the immune system recognize the cancer.

Metastatic

When breast cancer becomes metastatic, or metastasizes, it means the cancer has spread from the site of the original tumor in the breast to other parts of the body. The bones are the most common place for breast cancer to spread, followed by the lungs, the brain, and the liver. Many people use the term "mets" to talk about MBC.



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No Evidence of Disease (NED)

When there is no detectable evidence of breast cancer in your body after your doctor examines you or you have imaging after treatment.

NED, while extremely good news, doesn't mean you are cured. If you're considered to have NED after treatment for MBC, it's likely that you'll continue to be treated to keep the cancer from coming back.

PARP inhibitors

Targeted therapy medicines used to treat HER2-negative MBC in people with an inherited BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation. The BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes keep cells growing normally and prevent cancer growth. But a mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene increases the risk of breast and other cancers because these gene mutations interfere with cells' ability to repair damaged DNA. The poly ADP-ribose polymerase (PARP) enzyme fixes DNA damage in both healthy and cancer cells. Medicines that interfere with (inhibit) the PARP enzyme make it difficult for cancer cells with a BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation to fix DNA damage and survive.

Palliative care

The goal of palliative care is to manage pain caused by cancer or other serious disease, and to help control the stress and anxiety that being diagnosed with breast cancer can cause. Palliative care aims to prevent or treat the symptoms and side effects of cancer and its treatment along with any related psychological, social, and spiritual problems. Palliative care can be given at any time during cancer care, from right after diagnosis, to near the end of life. Hospice is a type of palliative care offered at the end of life.

Recurrence

When cancer comes back after treatment. When breast cancer comes back in the same breast, it's called local recurrence. When breast cancer comes back in another part of the body, such as the bones or lungs, it's called distant or metastatic recurrence.

Scanxiety

People diagnosed with MBC have imaging scans multiple times per year to check how well treatment is working and ensure that the cancer isn't growing or spreading to other areas of the body. Many people feel anxious when they're due for a scan or waiting for results, which many people call "scanxiety."



IV Stage IV

Stage IV or MBC is cancer that has spread beyond the breast to other places in the body, such as the bone, lungs, liver, or brain. Cancer may be stage IV at first diagnosis, which doctors call “de novo,” or it can be a recurrence of a previous breast cancer that has spread to other parts of the body.

For research purposes, the American Cancer Society (ACS) and the NCI say that a cancer’s stage doesn’t change after diagnosis. This is not how most people — even most oncologists — talk and think about cancer. If someone has breast cancer come back in a part of the body away from the breast, the person and doctors usually consider that cancer to be stage IV/metastatic.

Targeted therapies

Targeted therapies for MBC target specific characteristics of cancer cells, such as a protein that allows the cancer cells to grow in a rapid or abnormal way.

Treatment break

Sometimes you may need to take a break from treatment so your body can rest and recover, especially if you’re having troubling side effects. Talk to your medical team about your quality of life, your goals, and any special events you have coming up so you can develop a treatment plan that includes breaks when you need them.

Unresectable

Unresectable means the cancer can’t be removed completely with surgery.



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