

Secondary Breast Cancer



This information sheet is for anyone who has had a diagnosis of secondary breast cancer.

It may also be useful for the people around you, the sheet discusses topics such as the physical and emotional impact it can have on you and those around you. It talks about living with the disease and coming to terms with the future. It looks briefly at symptoms and treatments and lists sources of help and support available to you. For some women, having information about what is happening to them can be a way of taking back some control at a time when they may be feeling overwhelmed and powerless.

Although we refer to 'women' throughout the text, men who have been diagnosed with secondary breast cancer may also find the information relevant and helpful.

Secondary breast cancer occurs when breast cancer cells spread from the first (primary) tumour in the breast through the lymphatic or blood system to other parts of the body. You may hear this referred to as metastases, advanced breast cancer, secondary tumours or secondaries.

A diagnosis of secondary breast cancer means that the cancer cannot be cured, although it can be controlled, sometimes for years.

Symptoms

Every woman's experience of secondary breast cancer is different. The severity of symptoms varies widely and some women experience few or no symptoms. General symptoms, which women may experience, include unusual tiredness, loss of appetite and feeling under the weather.

Treatment

Secondary breast cancer may respond to several types of treatments:

- Hormone therapies
- Radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy
- Monoclonal antibodies.

Hormone therapies

Most hormone therapies work by decreasing the amount of oestrogen in the body, or by stopping the cancer cells accessing oestrogen. Side effects of hormone therapy can sometimes be annoying, but they are rarely serious. There are many different hormone treatments available; giving doctors the option of trying several types.

Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy uses high energy rays to destroy cancer cells while doing as little harm as possible to normal cells. Radiation therapy can reduce the size of cancers in some parts of the body and help relieve pain.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is the use of anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. These drugs circulate in the bloodstream reaching cancer cells throughout the body. Chemotherapy treatment may decrease the size of the cancer or prevent it from growing bigger.

Controlling the symptoms and effects of secondary breast cancer

The best way of controlling the symptoms of secondary breast cancer is to treat the cancer itself. Sometimes treatments work quickly and there is an immediate improvement in symptoms. However, if treatments take several weeks to work, there are various ways of controlling symptoms.

Morphine is a commonly used medication for severe pain. The dose can be adjusted to suit each individual. When morphine is used in its proper role as a pain reliever, it is given in controlled doses and people do not become addicted.

Breathing problems

Always seek medical attention if breathing becomes difficult.

Relationships and Sexuality

Communicating and sharing your feelings can result in greater openness, sensitivity and physical closeness between you both. Gestures of affection, gentle touches, cuddling and fondling also reassure you of your need for each other.

Support

Emotional support

Feelings can be muddled and change quickly. This is quite normal and there is no right or wrong way to feel. It is not clearly known exactly why some cancers spread, but it may help you to know that nothing you have done has caused this situation. Coping with the diagnosis is an ongoing adjustment process for you, your family and friends.

There are no easy answers when it comes to facing a life threatening illness. Every person is different and will find his or her own way of coping with their difficult situation. Talking with family and friends about fears of death can

give loved ones the opportunity they have been waiting for to help and support you.

Talking to someone outside the family may also be helpful. A counsellor, religious or spiritual adviser or the hospital chaplain can be good sources of support for many people, whatever their spiritual beliefs. You may find support or self-help groups helpful. Your doctor, nurses, social worker and others involved in your care will also be willing to help. Seeking professional help is not a sign of failure but shows a positive attitude to your worries.

Talking with your children

How much you tell children will obviously depend on how old they are. All young children need to know that it is not their fault. They also need to know that you may have to go into hospital. Slightly older children can probably understand a simple explanation of what is wrong. Adolescent children can obviously understand much more. All children need to know what will happen to them while you are in hospital, who will look after them and how their daily life will be affected.

Cancer Society Information and Support Services

Local Cancer Societies provide confidential information and support. Call your local Cancer Society and speak to support services staff or phone **0800 CANCER (226 237)**.

Local Cancer Society centres offer a range of services for people with cancer and their families.

These may include:

- volunteer drivers providing transport to treatment
- accommodation
- support and education groups.

Palliative care helps to support and help you and your partner, family/whānau during those times when your illness is causing particular problems or distress.

Complementary and Alternative therapies

It is important to let your doctor know if you are taking any complementary or alternative therapies because some treatments may be harmful if they are taken at the same time as conventional treatments.

Interpreting services

New Zealand's Health and Disability Code states that everyone has the right to have an interpreter present during a medical consultation. Family or friends may assist if you and your doctor do not speak the same language, but you can also ask your doctor to provide an interpreter if using family members is inappropriate or not possible.

Diet and food safety

A balanced nutritious diet will help to keep you as well as possible and cope with any side effects of treatment. The Cancer Society's booklet called Eating Well/ Kia Pai te Kai gives useful eating advice and recipes. Phone your local Cancer Society office for a copy of this booklet, call the Cancer Information Service on **0800 CANCER (226 237)** or download the booklet from our website: www.cancernz.org.nz.