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# AFTER A BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS: QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

**After you receive a breast cancer diagnosis, your doctor will order various diagnostic tests that provide important details about your type and stage of breast cancer. The results of these tests help your health care team determine the best treatment option for you. It's a good idea to bring a list of questions and write down the doctor's responses. In addition, if possible, bring someone with you to any appointment; another set of ears can help reduce confusion.**



## HERE IS A LIST OF QUESTIONS THAT YOU MAY WANT TO ASK YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM:

**Since I've been diagnosed, I've been overwhelmed. How can I better cope with my diagnosis?** A cancer diagnosis turns a person's world upside down emotionally and physically. Your team of doctors, nurses and social workers are valuable sources of support as you cope with a cancer diagnosis. Oncology social workers are licensed professionals who counsel people affected by cancer, providing emotional support and helping people access practical assistance. CancerCare's oncology social workers provide individual counseling, support groups and locate services face-to-face, online or on the telephone, free of charge. To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call 800-813-HOPE (4673).

**Is my tumor invasive or noninvasive?** Invasive breast tumors are tumors that have started growing into nearby healthy breast tissues.

Noninvasive, or *in situ* tumors, are confined to the milk ducts; this is the earliest stage of breast cancer. As is true for most cancers, breast cancer in the earliest stage usually has the best chance of being effectively managed.

### What stage is my tumor?

A tumor's stage refers to its size and extent of spread in the body—e.g., whether it has spread to lymph nodes or other organs. Cancer confined to the breast may be called localized cancer. Cancer that has spread to other organs is called metastatic cancer. A cancer's stage is often denoted by a Roman numeral (I, II, III or IV). The higher the numeral, the more the cancer has spread within the body.

**What grade is my tumor?** A tumor's grade refers to how the tumor cells look under a microscope. The more different they look from healthy cells, the higher the grade and the more quickly the cancer is likely to grow.

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**What is my hormone receptor status?** Some breast tumors are stimulated to grow by the hormone estrogen. Tumors take in estrogen via structures on tumor cell surfaces called estrogen or progesterone receptors. Tumor cells that have many of these receptors on their surfaces are said to be estrogen- or progesterone-receptor positive. These tumors are often successfully treated with hormonal therapy.

**What is my HER2/neu status?** HER2/neu is a substance that is overproduced in about 25 percent of all breast cancers. Tumors that overproduce HER2/neu are called HER2 positive and may respond to treatment with drugs like trastuzumab, which target HER2/neu.

### **What is my recommended treatment plan?**

Depending on the information that your doctor has learned about your tumor, your treatment options may include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone blockers or targeted treatments. Your doctor may also perform sentinel node mapping to determine if your breast cancer has spread to other lymph nodes. This minimally invasive procedure spares women from having to remove many lymph nodes in the underarm to find out if their cancer has spread, reducing the possibility of developing lymphedema, a painful swelling of the arm.

**What are the side effects of treatment?** Sometimes, side effects from medications can make people coping with cancer feel worse. Maintaining a good quality of life is an important part of your treatment because it will enable you to finish taking your medication. A key to managing side effects is to be aware of them and communicate with your health care team when they arise. Report them right away—don't wait for your next appointment. Your health care team can help prevent and reduce side effects of breast cancer treatment.

**Is there a clinical trial I can participate in? If so, will it be covered by my insurance?** Clinical trials are the standard by which we measure the worth of new treatments and the quality of life of patients as they receive those treatments. For this reason, doctors and researchers urge people with cancer to take part in clinical trials. Read CancerCare's "Clinical Trials: What You Need to Know" fact sheet to learn more information on clinical trials.



### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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