

THE DISEASE STATE

Breast cancer is a malignant tumor that has developed from cells of the breast. The disease occurs mostly in women, but does occur rarely in men.

Each breast has 15-20 sections called lobes, which have many smaller sections called lobules. The lobes and lobules are connected by thin tubes called ducts. The most common type of breast cancer is ductal cancer. It is found in the cells of the ducts. Cancer that begins in the lobes or lobules is called lobular cancer. Lobular cancer is more often found in both breasts than other types of breast cancer. Inflammatory breast cancer is an uncommon type of breast cancer. In this disease, the breast is warm, red, and swollen.

Hereditary breast cancer makes up approximately 5%-10% of all breast cancer cases. The genes in cells carry the hereditary information that is received from a person's parents. Several genes have been found to be defective in some breast cancer patients. Relatives of breast cancer patients who carry these defective genes may be more likely to develop breast or ovarian cancer. Some defective genes are more common in certain ethnic groups. Tests are being developed to determine who has the genetic defect long before any cancer appears.

Hormonal contraceptives may be another factor to consider. Research findings suggest a link between contraceptive use and a slightly increased risk of developing breast cancer.

Why a Breast Biopsy May Be Necessary

A doctor should be seen if changes in the breasts are noticed. The doctor may suggest that you have a mammogram, a special x-ray of the breast that may find tumors that are too small to feel. A change in your breast, such as an abnormality detected by a mammogram or a lump found by you or your doctor, may need to be biopsied to determine whether the area of concern is malignant (cancerous) or benign (not cancerous). A breast biopsy is the removal of a sample of breast tissue for analysis and is the only definitive way to diagnose an abnormality in your breast.

Fortunately, 80 percent of biopsies result in a benign diagnosis. However, if cancer is present, early detection greatly increases your chances for recovery. The Mammotome Breast Biopsy System is one type of biopsy test.

What If My Breast Biopsy Result Is Cancerous

If the biopsy shows that there is cancer, it is important that certain tests (called estrogen and progesterone receptor tests) be done on the cancer cells. Estrogen and progesterone receptor tests may tell whether hormones affect the way the cancer grows. They may also give information about the chances of the tumor coming back (recurring). The results help a doctor decide whether to use hormone therapy to stop the cancer from growing. Tissue from the tumor needs to be taken to the laboratory for estrogen and progesterone tests at the time of biopsy because it may be hard to get enough cancer cells later.

The chance of recovery (prognosis) and choice of treatment depend on the stage of the cancer (whether it is just in the breast or has spread to other places in the body), the type of breast cancer, certain characteristics of the cancer cells, and whether the cancer is found in the other breast. A woman's age, weight, whether or not a woman is still having menstrual periods, and her general health can also affect the prognosis and choice of treatment.