

# WHAT IS Metastatic or Advanced Breast Cancer?

Advanced breast cancer, also referred to as metastatic breast cancer, is when the breast cancer has left the breast and spread to other parts of the body such as the bone, liver, lung, or brain. In almost all patients, this type of breast cancer cannot be cured, however, there are many treatments that are available to treat the cancer.

## TREATMENT FOR Metastatic Breast Cancer?

The main doctor who treats advanced breast cancer patients is called a medical oncologist. This specialist doctor knows about the different medicines used to treat advanced breast cancer. These treatments may cause side effects. The oncologist will always tell your mum what to expect, and what action can be taken to prevent or lessen the side effect severity.

There are four common types of treatment used for advanced breast cancer:

**1. Hormone blocking Treatment or Endocrine therapy (ET)** is a treatment that blocks the hormones which promote cancer cell growth. ET is only used in patients who have oestrogen (ER) and/or progesterone receptors (PR) detected on their breast cancer cells, also known as ER/PR positive breast cancer. These medicines generally have manageable side effects and when effective, can be taken for many months to years.

**2. Chemotherapy treatment** generally stops cancer cells from dividing inside your body, leading to the cancer cell's death. Cancer cells are particularly sensitive to chemotherapy due to their ability to grow or divide much faster than normal healthy cells. Unfortunately, some normal healthy cells can still be affected by chemotherapy but to a much lesser degree.

Chemotherapy is given as a tablet, or more commonly into the veins. The most common side effect is it can make people feel more tired for a few days to a week after treatment. People on chemotherapy often need to rest more or need a bit more help around the house while they are on treatment. They might also feel like not eating for a few days after chemotherapy. Sometimes they will need different foods to eat. It can also cause hair to fall out, but this is not painful and when the chemotherapy is stopped, the hair re-grows.

**Targeted therapies** work by attaching themselves to the receptors on the surface of the cell and blocking them from receiving growth signals

**Example:** trastuzumab blocking a HER2 receptor.



**3. "Targeted" treatments** are used in specific types of breast cancer with proteins that are involved in cancer growth. Targeted treatments are given as tablets or into the veins. They work by blocking special genes or instructions in the cancer cells. There are many different targeted treatments that your mum's doctor may use.

**4. Radiation treatment** uses carefully controlled high energy xrays to stop the growth of "spots" of cancer. It is usually given every day for 1 to 2 weeks and can help with painful spots. The radiation oncologist is the doctor who oversees this type of treatment.

We always aim to treat advanced cancer for as long as possible and we aim to keep treatment going for years. The treatments mentioned above, may stop working and your parent's medical oncologist may need to swap to different drugs from time to time.

## My Mum's BREAST CANCER

Many young people find that when they understand their mum's diagnosis, treatment and what to expect with changes in their health, they feel more prepared to deal with things when they happen. How much you want to know about your mum's cancer diagnosis is up to you. Some people want to know all the details whereas others just want to know the main parts. If you do want to know more about what's happening, you may have to take the lead and just ask. You may also have to remind people to be honest and not sugar coat things. If your parent(s) agrees, it may be beneficial to attend an oncology appointment. This will allow you to get an understanding of your mum's advanced breast cancer diagnosis from her oncologist. It would also be a good time to ask the oncologist questions about treatment, side effects of treatment, or anything else that may be concerning you.

## Can I get BREAST CANCER?

Cancer grows in a person and you cannot catch cancer like you would with a cold or flu. The biggest risk factors for breast cancer are being female and getting older. In some families, a tendency to grow cancer cells is passed on from the parent to the children in the genes or "instructions for the cells" but this takes many years. If you are worried about this for your family, talk to your mum's doctor.

## How it impacts THE FAMILY?

When a parent has cancer, it's common for the family's focus to change. Some people in the family may feel left out. Your mum may be using her energy to get through her treatment, whereas other adults in the family may be focused on helping your mum with cancer. Your parents don't intend for you to feel left out, and it may just happen because there is so much going on. As a result, cancer can mess with all parts of your life and really change things at home. Your family and personal routines may change, and initially you might have to take on a lot more responsibilities and not get to do your usual activities. Your mum may feel it is important to spend more time with you when she feels well. However, you also have to remember that it is ok to go out with friends and have a fun time, and your needs and feelings are just as important.

## Where do I find MORE INFORMATION?

You might be aware that many ideas you find on the internet won't be based in fact and won't apply to your mum's unique cancer. Therefore, it is always best to make sure that your questions are answered by your parents or by the doctors who are treating your mum.

## OTHER PLACES FOR Information

Here are some websites with helpful general information about breast cancer:

[www.bcrc-wa.com.au](http://www.bcrc-wa.com.au)

[www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au)

[www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au)

[www.cancercouncil.com.au](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au)

