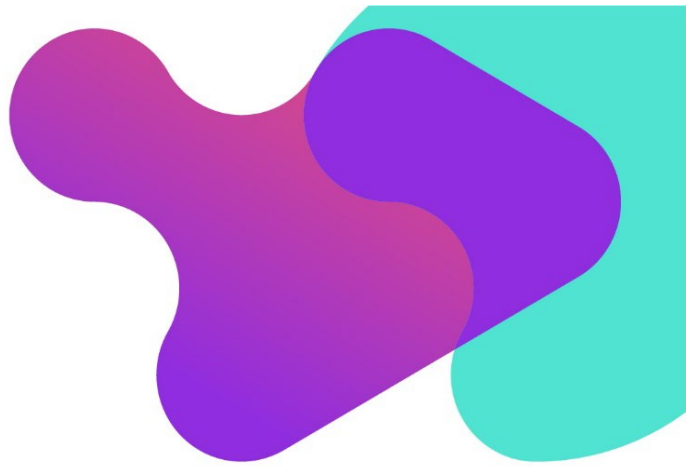




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A LETTER TO PATIENTS

Diagnosed with Breast Cancer: Where to Start?

Overwhelmed. Terrified. Confused. These are just a few emotions which patients who have been diagnosed with breast cancer may experience. The uncertainty of the journey ahead can be very daunting. The aim of this article is to assist patients navigate through the 'information overload', one step at a time.

1. How is breast cancer diagnosed?

- In many cases, patients detect a lump in the breast or under their arm (the axilla) which prompts further investigation with a mammogram. In some cases, patients go for a routine mammogram (or screening) and a breast mass is detected. Early detection is important as breast cancer which is diagnosed early can be more successfully treated.
- If a mass looks suspicious on a mammogram, a biopsy will be performed. This involves a doctor inserting a needle into the lump to get a tissue sample. This tissue is then sent to a pathology laboratory for testing.
- If the biopsy confirms that the mass is cancerous, the next step is for the patient to be referred to a surgeon or oncologist to discuss cancer care options.

2. Breast cancer: what next

- The treatment of breast cancer is not the same for everyone and depends on a number of factors. Some of these factors include:
 - i. Stage of the cancer: is the cancer localized to the breast or has it spread to lymph nodes (glands) or other organs? The most common organs to which breast cancer spreads are the lungs, bones and liver. Your doctor may send you for x-rays or scans to establish if the cancer has spread.
 - ii. Specific type of breast cancer (this is determined by special tests conducted in a laboratory and the results of which are used to help to guide treatment).
 - iii. Patient preference: you should be actively involved in all decisions regarding your treatment. Don't be afraid to ask your treating doctor/s questions.
- Treatment of breast cancer may include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, endocrine therapy, and targeted therapy. Management of breast cancer is not the same for everyone and is individualised according to the type and stage of the disease. Other factors, such as age and patient preferences are also taken into consideration. It is important to discuss the various treatment options with your treating doctor/s.

3. The importance of credible information to empower you throughout your journey.

Misinformation can spread rapidly through unreliable websites and social media. This can lead to uncertainty and anxiety. It is very important to access trustworthy information from credible websites and resources. If you have any questions or concerns, discuss these with your treating doctor. You can also ask your doctor to recommend websites and reading material which will help you to become empowered on your breast cancer journey. Below are three websites which I recommend to my patients:

- NCCN.org, Guidelines for patients, Invasive Breast Cancer, 2023
Available from: [Guidelines Detail \(nccn.org\)](https://www.nccn.org/guidelines/guidelines_detail.aspx)
- Breastcancer.org ([Breastcancer.org - Breast Cancer Information and Support](https://www.breastcancer.org))

4. Common myths and important facts about breast cancer

MYTH	FACT
Only middle-aged and older women are diagnosed with breast cancer	Breast cancer is more common in middle-aged and older women, but younger women can also be diagnosed with breast cancer. ¹
Only females get breast cancer	Although breast cancer is more common in females, males can also develop breast cancer. Treatment is similar for women and men.
Only women with a family history are at risk of developing breast cancer	Women with a family history of breast cancer do have a higher risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer. However, most women with breast cancer do not have a family history of the disease. Approximately 10% of breast cancers are hereditary. ²
All breast lumps are cancerous	A breast lump could mean cancer, but there are other non-cancerous causes of breast lumps including cysts (accumulation of fluid), fibroadenomas (benign breast lump) or scar tissue. It is very important that you see a doctor if you detect a breast lump or any changes in your breast so that cancer can be excluded.
All breast cancers are the same and receive the same treatment	There are different types of breast cancer. This is why a biopsy is important as it gives specific information about the type of breast cancer. This will then guide treatment. It is also important to establish the stage of breast cancer as this will also influence treatment and prognosis.

A breast cancer diagnosis is a life-changing event, and the road ahead may seem daunting and uncertain. Remember that you are not alone on this journey. Try to find inspiration knowing that others have faced similar challenges and that breast cancer patients are known for their strength and resilience. Understanding your disease can help you to feel empowered for the road ahead.

References

- Breastcancer.org [Internet]. Breast cancer facts. [cited 2023]
 Accessible via: [Breastcancer.org - Breast Cancer Information and Support](https://www.breastcancer.org). Accessed: 10 November 2023
- NCCN Guidelines for patients, Invasive Breast Cancer, 2023.
 Accessible via: [Guidelines for Patients \(nccn.org\)](https://www.nccn.org). Accessed: 17 November 2023

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