

Diagnosing breast cancer

A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary on 'Diagnosing breast cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- Breast cancer tests
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You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Breast cancer tests

You usually start by seeing your GP. Your GP will examine you and if necessary refer you to a specialist breast clinic.

At the breast clinic

The doctor or specialist nurse will take your medical history and examine your breasts. They will also feel for any enlarged lymph nodes (a network of glands found throughout the body) under your arms and at the base of your neck. You may also need some of the following tests.

Mammogram or ultrasound

A mammogram is an X-ray of the breasts. If you are under 35 you are more likely to have an ultrasound scan instead of a mammogram. You may also have it if you have a lump that doesn't show up on the mammogram.

Having a biopsy

A biopsy means taking a small sample of cells or tissue from your breast and looking at them under a microscope to see if they are cancerous. Usually your biopsy can be done with a local anaesthetic. But sometimes the doctor needs to do a small operation under general anaesthetic. There are different types of biopsy. Some biopsies are done while you lie on your front. Or they may be done during a mammogram.

Further tests for breast cancer

If tests show that you have breast cancer you will have some further tests. These tests check the size of the cancer and whether there is any spread to nearby lymph nodes or to other parts of the body. They tell the doctor the stage of the cancer. The stage is important because it helps your doctor to decide on the best treatment for you.

Your doctor will test your breast cancer cells to see if they have receptors for hormones or other proteins (such as HER2). This helps the doctor to know whether hormone therapies or biological therapies (such as Herceptin) might work for you.

Blood test and chest X-ray

Most women have blood tests and some have a chest X-ray. Nearly everyone diagnosed with breast cancer has surgery, and these tests are part of the standard preparation before surgery.

Scans

You may need to have one or more scans. This might be to get a better picture of your breast cancer. Or it may be to see if the cancer has spread to your lymph nodes, liver or bones. Ultrasound, CT, MRI and bone scans are all used.

Waiting for your results

Waiting can be an anxious time. It may help to talk about your worries with a partner, close friend or relative. The breast clinic may have a trained breast care nurse or counsellor who can talk to you. Or you can contact a support group or an online forum such as CancerChat

[\(http://cancerchat.cancerresearchuk.org/\)](http://cancerchat.cancerresearchuk.org/)

Research into diagnosing breast cancer

All tests for cancer must be fully researched before they can be adopted as standard. This is so that we can be sure they work better than approaches we already use. It also helps to make sure that they are safe and don't have harmful effects.

A lot of research is looking into finding better ways of diagnosing breast cancer. Trials and studies are checking new blood tests, different types of mammograms, and scans.

Cancer Research UK supports a lot of UK laboratory research into cancer and also supports many UK and international clinical trials.

Questions for your doctor

- When will you know if I definitely have cancer?
- Which tests do I need?
- How long will it take before I get the results?
- How will you tell me the results?
- When will you tell me if there are signs the cancer has spread?
- If the results show the breast cancer has spread, what happens next?
- Will you test for hormone receptors?
- Will you test for HER2 receptors?
- When will I start treatment?
- Will I be able to see a breast care nurse?
- Who can I contact for emotional support?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/cancerhelp>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in October 2014. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. Copyright Cancer Research UK 2014. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and in the Isle of Man (1103)