

After being diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, you will begin to have important conversations with your healthcare team. This dictionary will help you understand words you may often hear while talking to a healthcare professional.



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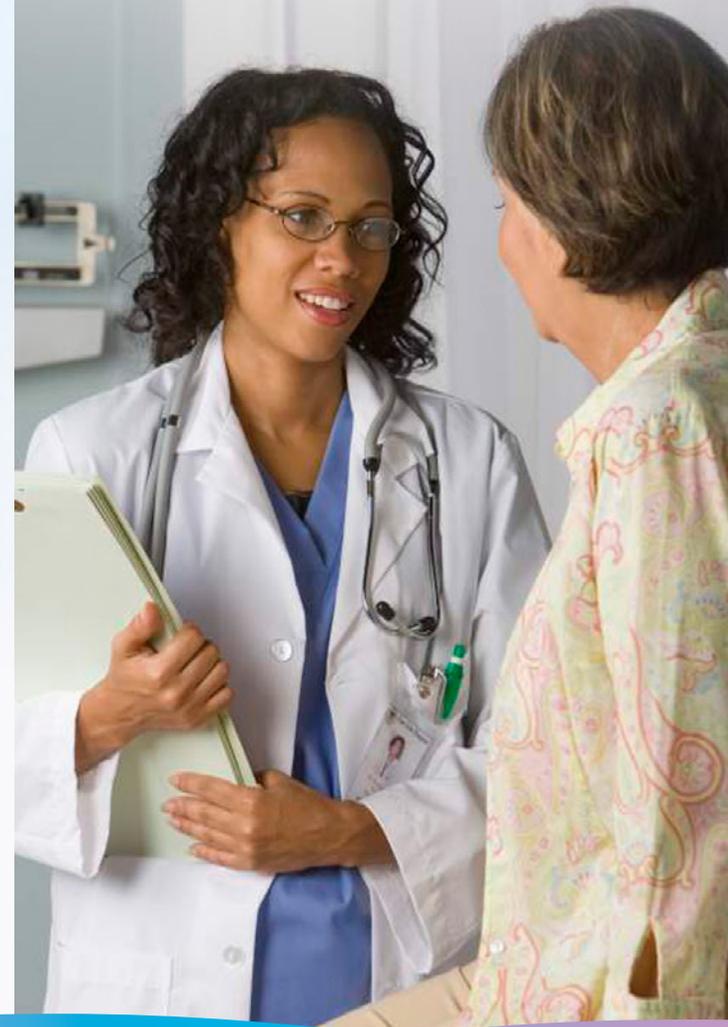
*Our mission is to help women and their loved ones make sense of the complex medical and personal information about breast cancer, so they can make the best decisions for their lives.*

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## METASTATIC BREAST CANCER DICTIONARY

A guide to common terms you may hear after being diagnosed with metastatic disease.



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## Genetic Mutations

*Definition:* Genetic mutations are changes in a gene's DNA that cause genes to function abnormally. A woman who inherits an abnormal version of the BRCA1 (Breast CAncer gene one) and BRCA2 (Breast CAncer gene two) genes has a higher risk of developing breast or other cancers. All cancers have genetic changes, whether the patient has an inherited cancer syndrome or not.

*Additional Information:* Genes are like an instruction manual for cell growth and function. Abnormalities within genes may lead to faulty cell growth or function. Most inherited cases of breast cancer are associated with two abnormal genes: BRCA1 and BRCA2. Having information about genetic mutations can help inform treatment decisions.



## Metastatic Breast Cancer (Stage IV Breast Cancer)

*Definition:* Metastatic breast cancer is breast cancer that has spread through the lymph vessels and into and through the blood vessels to other organs of the body, most often the bones, lungs, liver, or brain; or breast cancer that has spread locally to the skin and lymph nodes inside the neck near the collarbone.

*Additional Information:* While a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer can be overwhelming, research has led to many advances in treatment over the past several years. As a result, some women with metastatic disease are living longer. Understanding the stage of the breast cancer will help you have more informed conversations with your healthcare team.



## Neutropenia

*Definition:* Neutropenia means that the number of blood cells called neutrophils is too low. Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell that fight infection.

*Additional Information:* Some cancer treatments can damage or kill healthy cells – such as infection-fighting white blood cells – in addition to cancer cells. Neutropenia puts a person with cancer at a higher risk of developing infections, some serious in nature, and can affect the ability to receive their cancer treatment. Medications are available to help the body make more neutrophils.



## Palliative Therapy

*Definition:* Palliative therapy is treatment to relieve symptoms caused by advanced cancer. Its purpose is to improve the quality of life and sometimes extend life, but it is not intended to cure the cancer. Palliative therapy can include systemic treatments, surgery and radiation.

*Additional Information:* Palliative therapy works to help a person feel as comfortable as possible. In cases of metastatic breast cancer, treatment with palliative care usually means that treatments to control the cancer may have stopped working, so quality of life and staying comfortable are the priority.



## Progression

*Definition:* Progression means that the cancer grows larger or spreads to other parts of the body.

*Additional Information:* When an earlier stage of cancer becomes Stage 4 cancer, it has progressed to metastatic disease. Disease progression tells your doctor that it may be time to change treatment plans. On the positive side, newer treatments are helping people extend the time until breast cancer progresses further.



## Radiation Therapy

*Definition:* Radiation therapy is the use of high-energy radiation from x-rays, gamma rays, neutrons, and other sources to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. Radiation may come from a machine outside the body (external-beam radiation therapy), or it may come from radioactive material placed in the body in the area near cancer cells (internal radiation therapy, implant radiation, or brachytherapy).

*Additional Information:* Radiation therapy is a highly targeted and highly effective way to destroy cancer cells in the breast that remain after surgery. For women with signs or symptoms from metastases, radiation therapy can be used to help relieve the symptoms and to control the disease in areas where the cancer has spread. It is also important to be prepared for the possibility of side effects, which vary from person to person.



## Receptor

*Definition:* A receptor is a protein inside or on the surface of a cell that binds to a specific substance that appears on the outside of the cell. This binding causes a specific reaction in the functioning of the cell.

*Additional Information:* The presence or absence of certain receptors, such as estrogen, progesterone and human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2), indicate whether or not the breast cancer cells receive signals from these proteins telling them to grow. Testing for receptor status is an important factor in determining if cancer is likely to respond to a particular treatment such as hormonal or targeted therapy.



## Response

*Definition:* A complete response means that signs of cancer cannot be detected by your doctor, based on your symptoms, physical exam, and radiology and lab tests. This does not always mean the cancer has been cured. A partial response is a decrease in the size of a cancer, or in the range of cancer in the body, in response to treatment. Also called partial remission.

*Additional Information:* Response to treatment tells your doctor if the chosen therapies you are taking are working for you.



## Systemic Therapy

*Definition:* Systemic therapy is treatment that treats the cancer but also affects the whole body (your whole system). For example, in breast cancer treatment, chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, and targeted therapy are systemic treatments.

*Additional Information:* Women with metastatic breast cancer may receive various systemic therapies to control the disease. Systemic therapy can be taken orally or directly into the bloodstream to reach cancer cells throughout the body. New therapies are available and in development that are more targeted to spare normal cells and focus treatment on cancer cells. It is also important to be prepared for the possibility of side effects, which vary from person to person.



## Tumor Markers

*Definition:* Tumor markers are substances normally present in small amounts in the blood or other tissues. Cancer cells can sometimes make these substances. When the amount of these substances rises above normal, cancer might be present in the body. Examples of tumor markers include CA 125 (ovarian cancer), CA 15-3 and 27-29 (breast cancer), CEA (ovarian, lung, breast, pancreas, and gastrointestinal tract cancers), and PSA (prostate cancer).

*Additional Information:* Tumor marker status can provide critical information for making treatment decisions. In fact, some professional cancer organizations recommend that these tests be done for all cases of invasive breast cancer at the time of initial diagnosis.

SOURCE: Breastcancer.org website. Available at: [www.breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org). Accessed September 22, 2015.