General Overview: Finding and Treating Breast Cancer

Finding out if you have or don't have breast cancer can take weeks and involve many different kinds of tests.

Image: National Cancer Institute; Bill Branson, Photographer

Screening tests look for signs of disease in women without symptoms. These tests should be part of every healthy woman's routine. Three examples of breast cancer screening tests are a yearly mammogram, a breast exam by your doctor's hand, and a breast exam using your own hand. If one of these screening tests is abnormal or a lump is found, your doctor will order a "diagnostic" test.

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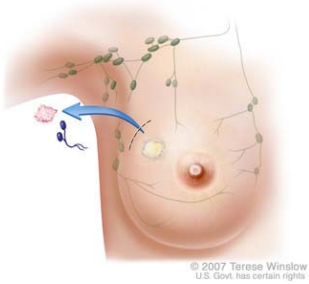
Diagnostic tests look for the disease when breast cancer is suspected because of symptoms. One diagnostic test is an MRI. An MRI looks at areas inside your body by using a magnet and computer that make detailed pictures. Blood tests and bone scans are two other diagnostic tests. Also, a mammogram and ultrasound are other diagnostic tests.



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Some type of surgery is usually done to find out for absolute certain if you have or do not have cancer. **A biopsy** is surgery to take out a small piece of tissue to check if it is cancer or not. This surgery may tell you and your doctor what's there and what next steps might be needed. Often the biopsy is done first and then additional surgery is done to remove the cancer and some surrounding tissue. The surgery may also remove some lymph nodes and find out if the cancer has spread beyond areas seen by the diagnostic tests. A **lumpectomy** is surgery that removes a cancer lump and some tissue around it. A **mastectomy** is surgery that removes the whole breast.

Image: National Cancer Institute

If no further surgery is required, other treatments may be added. **Radiation treatment** is sometimes, but not always, necessary. If a lumpectomy is done, radiation must be given to prevent the cancer from returning to the remaining breast tissue. Radiation is also a necessary treatment if the cancer is large or is in several lymph nodes.

If cancer is found and was not removed during the diagnostic surgery, your team of doctors will recommend a particular order of treatment. Here is a common order of treatment:

Image: National Cancer Institute

Usually surgery to remove the cancer is first. If **chemotherapy** is going to be part of your care, it goes second. Radiation usually follows surgery. Radiation follows chemotherapy if it is given. Tamoxifen or other hormonal therapy is usually started after the other treatments have been given.

Sometimes treatment is given in a different order if women and their doctors want to see the effects of treatment before the cancer is removed with surgery.

But always the cancer is removed. For women with larger, more advanced disease, chemotherapy may be given first. The chemotherapy will shrink large tumors and fight cancer in the rest of the body, before surgery. Some health centers give chemotherapy and radiation together (not separately).