



What to expect during each stage of treatment and beyond

## Breast cancer support

For free resources about breast cancer, or to find support available in your area, call Breast Cancer Network Australia on 1800 500 258 or **visit** [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au)

You can also speak to qualified cancer nurses at the Cancer Council on **13 11 20**. They can answer your questions about the effects of

cancer, explain what will happen during treatment and link you to support groups and other community resources.

If you need an interpreter, call TIS (Translating and Interpreting Service) on 13 14 50. For support and advice for carers, call the Carers Association on 1800 242 636.

## 1. Initial investigations and referral

Your general practitioner (GP) will assess any symptoms you may notice (for example, a change in the size or shape of your breast or a new lump), conduct a physical examination and arrange tests.

Your GP should also discuss your needs (including physical, psychological, social and information needs) and recommend sources of reliable information and support.

### Tests you may have:

#### Mammogram

A low-dose x-ray of the breasts. Each breast is pressed between two x-ray plates to spread the breast tissue so that clear pictures can be taken. A mammogram can detect changes that are too small to be felt during a physical examination.

#### Ultrasound

High-frequency sound waves are used to create an image of the tissues inside the breast.

#### Biopsy

Small samples of cells are removed from the breast lump, using a needle, and are examined under a microscope.

Tests should be done within two weeks. If breast cancer or other abnormalities are present, you will be referred to a specialist for further testing within two weeks. Your GP will provide the clinic with information about your medical history, whether there is a history of cancer in your family, and the results of the initial tests.

**It can be helpful to bring a family member or friend with you to your appointments.**

## 2. Diagnosis and staging

Your specialist may conduct further tests to find out the stage of the cancer (how big it is and whether it has spread to other parts of the body).

You should also meet with a health professional (usually a breast care nurse), who will discuss your needs with you during and after

treatment (including physical, psychological, social and information needs) and may refer you to another health professional (for example, a social worker or a physiotherapist) for different aspects of your care.

**It can be helpful to contact cancer peer support groups and support groups for carers.**

## 3. Treatment

To ensure you receive the best care, your specialist will arrange for a team of health professionals to plan your treatment based on your preferences and needs.

The team will be made up of health professionals who have experience managing and supporting women with breast cancer. Your specialist will tell you when the team will be discussing your case.

Your doctor should discuss the different treatment options with you including the likely outcomes, expected timeframes, possible side effects and the risks and benefits. For younger women, your team should also discuss the option of fertility preservation and provide clear information about the risk of early menopause and hormonal changes.

You might want to ask for more time before deciding on your treatment, or ask for a second opinion. Your doctor may also suggest you consider taking part in a clinical trial. If you wish, you can ask for a referral to a fertility service and/or genetic counsellor to help you evaluate your options.

Let your team know about any complementary therapies you are using or thinking about trying. Some therapies may not be appropriate, depending on your medical treatment.

There are a number of ways to treat breast cancer including surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy or drug therapy. Usually, more than one type of treatment is recommended to get the best outcome.

### Treatment options:

#### Surgery

Surgery is the most common treatment for early breast cancer. It involves either breast-conserving surgery, where only the cancer and a small amount of healthy tissue is removed, or mastectomy, where the breast is removed. You should be fully informed of your options and offered the option of immediate or delayed reconstructive surgery if undergoing a mastectomy.

### 3. Treatment cont'd

**Chemotherapy, targeted/biological therapy (for example, trastuzumab) or hormone/endocrine therapy (for example, tamoxifen)**

This may benefit some women with breast cancer. Could be given before or after surgery.

#### **Radiation therapy (also called radiotherapy)**

This treatment may benefit some women with early breast cancer (after surgery).

For more information about treatment and treatment side effects ask your doctor or **visit** [www.bcna.org.au/resources](http://www.bcna.org.au/resources)

### 4. After treatment

After your treatment is completed, your doctor should provide you with a treatment summary that details the care you received including:

- diagnostic tests that were performed and their results
- types of treatment used and when they were performed
- treatment plans from other health professionals
- supportive care services provided to you.

To monitor your health and make sure the cancer has not returned, you may need regular check-ups. You and your GP should receive a follow-up care plan that tells you about:

- the type of follow-up that is best for you

- types of tests that you may continue to have (it is not usually necessary to have a lot of body scans but annual breast imaging, if appropriate, is important)
- care plans for managing any side effects of treatment should they occur
- how to get specialist medical help quickly if you think the cancer has returned.

Your doctor should:

- discuss your needs with you and refer you to appropriate health professionals and/or community organisations, if support is required
- provide information on the signs and symptoms to look out for that might mean a return of the cancer
- provide information on prevention and healthy living.

### 5. If cancer returns

Sometimes breast cancer can come back after treatment. Everyone is different, and the risk of cancer returning will be influenced by many different things including the type of breast cancer. This is why it is important you have regular check-ups that include a physical examination and breast imaging if appropriate.

### 6. Living with cancer

**Side effects:** Some people experience side effects (for example, weight changes or tiredness) that continue beyond the end of treatment. Side effects sometimes might not begin until months after treatment has finished.

For more information about side effects ask your doctor or **visit** [www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/survivors/long-term-side-effects](http://www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/survivors/long-term-side-effects)

**Advance care plan:** Your doctor may discuss with you the option

of developing an advance care plan. An advance care plan is a formal way of setting out your wishes for future medical care.

For more information about advance care planning ask your doctor or **visit** [www.advancecareplanning.org.au](http://www.advancecareplanning.org.au)

**Palliative care:** This type of treatment could be used at different stages to help you with pain relief, to reduce symptoms or to help improve your quality of life.

For more information about palliative care ask your doctor or **visit** [www.palliativecare.com.au](http://www.palliativecare.com.au)

### 7. Questions of cost

There can be cost implications at each stage of the cancer care pathway, including costs of treatment, accommodation and travel. There can be substantial out-of-pocket costs if you are having treatment in a private health service, even if you have private health insurance.

You can discuss these costs with your doctor and/or private

health insurer for each type of treatment you may have. If you are experiencing financial difficulties due to your cancer treatment you can contact the social worker at your local hospital.

For more information about treatment costs **visit** [www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/living-cancer/dealing-practical-aspects-cancer/costs-treatment](http://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/living-cancer/dealing-practical-aspects-cancer/costs-treatment)

For more information about accommodation and travel costs **visit** [www.cancercouncil.com.au/get-support/practical-support-services](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/get-support/practical-support-services)

Some breast cancers are found through mammographic screening. The BreastScreen Australia Program is available free of charge to women from age 40. It is recommended that if you are aged 50–74 you consider undergoing a screening mammogram every two years.

**Visit** [www.breastscreen.org.au](http://www.breastscreen.org.au)

