



Inflammatory Breast Cancer: Questions and Answers

What is inflammatory breast cancer (IBC)?

Inflammatory breast cancer is rare but very aggressive type of breast cancer in which the cancer cells block the lymph vessels in the skin of the breast. This type of cancer is called “inflammatory” because the breast often looks swollen and “red” or “inflamed”. IBC accounts for 1 to 5 percent of all breast cancer cases in the United States. It tends to be diagnosed in younger women compared to non-IBC breast cancer. It occurs more frequently and at a younger age in African American women than in Caucasians. Like other types of cancer, IBC can occur in men, but usually at an older age than in women. Some studies have shown an association between family history of breast cancer and IBC, but more studies are needed to draw firm conclusions.

What are the symptoms of IBC?

Symptoms of IBC may include redness, swelling, and breast warmth, often without a distinct lump in the breast. The redness and warmth are caused by cancer cells blocking the lymph vessels in the skin. The skin of the breast may also appear pink, reddish purple, or bruised. The skin may also have ridges or appear pitted, like the skin of an orange, which is caused by a buildup of fluid and edema (swelling) in the breast. Other symptoms include heaviness, burning, aching, increase in breast size, tenderness, or a nipple that is inverted (facing inward). These symptoms usually develop quickly — over a period of weeks or months. Swollen lymph nodes may also be present under the arm, above the collarbone, or in both places. However, it is important to note that these symptoms may also be signs of other conditions such as infection, injury, or other types of cancer.

How is IBC diagnosed?

Diagnosis of IBC is based primarily on the results of a doctor’s clinical examination. Biopsy, mammogram, and breast ultrasound are used to confirm the diagnosis. IBC is classified as either stage IIIB or stage IV breast cancer. Stage IIIB breast cancers are locally advanced; stage IV breast cancer is cancer that has spread to other organs. IBC tends to grow rapidly, and the physical appearance of the breast of patients with IBC is different from that of patients with other stage III breast cancers. IBC is an especially aggressive, locally advanced breast cancer.

Cancer staging describes the extent or severity of an individual’s cancer

How is IBC treated?

Treatment consisting of chemotherapy, targeted therapy, surgery, radiation therapy, and hormonal therapy is used to treat IBC.

What is the prognosis for patients with IBC?

Prognosis describes the likely course and outcome of a disease — that is, the chance that a patient will recover or have a recurrence. IBC is more likely to have metastasized (spread to other areas of the body) at the time of diagnosis than non-IBC cases. As a result, the 5 year survival rate for patients with IBC is between 25 to 50%, which is significantly lower than the survival rate for patients with non-IBC breast cancer. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these statistics are averages based on large numbers of patients. Statistics cannot be used to predict what will happen to a particular patient because each person’s situation is unique. Patients are encouraged to talk to their doctors about their prognosis given their particular situation.

National Cancer Institute Telephone (toll free): 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) Live help online chat: <https://cissecurenci.nih.gov/livehelp/welcome.asp>