

Inflammatory breast cancer

This factsheet is for people who would like to know more about inflammatory breast cancer. It describes what inflammatory breast cancer is, the symptoms, how a diagnosis is made and what treatment may be offered.

We hope that it helps you to talk to your cancer specialist or breast care nurse, ask them any questions you may have and be involved in your treatment plan.

We also recommend reading our booklets **Treating breast cancer** and **Breast cancer and you: diagnosis, treatment and the future**.

What is inflammatory breast cancer?

Inflammatory breast cancer is a rare, fast growing type of breast cancer, which accounts for one to two per cent of all breast cancers.

It is called inflammatory because the skin of the breast often looks red and swollen – similar to some breast infections. The reddened appearance is caused by breast cancer cells blocking tiny lymph channels in the breast tissue. The lymph channels are part of the body's defence against infections.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The signs and symptoms of inflammatory breast cancer appear over a short space of time, usually days or weeks. Unlike other types of breast cancer, people probably won't notice a distinct lump. Instead they

might notice changes such as:

- redness, swelling or warmth in the breast
- the skin of the breast looking pink or bruised
- ridges appearing on the skin, or the breast looking pitted like orange skin (this is often described using the French term *peau d'orange*)
- an increase in breast size
- an inverted (pulled in) nipple.

How is a diagnosis made?

Inflammatory breast cancer is sometimes difficult to diagnose. This is because the symptoms can be similar to many non-cancerous conditions such as mastitis (a type of breast infection). Once you have been referred to a breast specialist, you may have several different types of tests to help make the diagnosis. These may include:

- mammogram (x-ray of the breast)
- ultrasound (creating a picture of the breast using sound waves)
- biopsy (removal of small piece of breast tissue or cells to be looked at under a microscope).

Once the breast cancer diagnosis is made, other tests such as a chest x-ray, liver ultrasound or bone scan may be recommended to check whether or not the cancer has spread outside the breast. If you would like to know more about these different tests you can call Breast Cancer Care's free helpline for further information.

What treatments might I be offered?

Once you have been diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer, your doctors will want to discuss your treatment options with you and prepare a treatment plan. The plan will be based on your test results.

Treatment for inflammatory breast cancer is usually started straight away. Although most breast cancers are treated first by surgery, followed sometimes by other treatments, with inflammatory breast cancer, treatments are often given in a different order. This is because this type of breast cancer can grow more quickly than other types so there is more chance that cancer cells may spread to other parts of the body.

Treatment usually involves treating the whole body (systemic treatment) as well as the tumour and the area around it (local treatment). A combination of chemotherapy, surgery, radiotherapy, targeted therapy and hormone therapy may be used.

Chemotherapy

You will usually be offered chemotherapy first. This is known as primary or neo-adjuvant treatment. It aims to control the disease in the breast and also to destroy any cancer cells that may have spread elsewhere in the body. Ideally the chemotherapy will reduce the size of the cancer and the amount of inflammation, making surgery easier. It may also help to reduce pain and discomfort.

For further information see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

Surgery

Following chemotherapy, most people will have surgery. With inflammatory breast cancer it is more common to have the whole breast removed (mastectomy). Your surgeon will normally remove the lymph glands from

your armpit (axilla) at the same time, as it is not unusual for cancer cells to have spread to this area.

In some rare cases it may be possible to remove part of the breast only, depending on the extent of the cancer and how well you have responded to chemotherapy. This is something your specialist will discuss with you.

If you are going to have a mastectomy, you may be offered breast reconstruction. It is possible to have a reconstruction at the same time (immediate reconstruction), but if you are having other treatments such as radiotherapy it is more likely that this will be done later on (delayed reconstruction). Delayed reconstruction can be done months or even years after your surgery. Your surgeon will discuss your options with you.

For more information see our **Breast reconstruction** booklet.

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy uses high energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells. It is usually given to the breast and sometimes the surrounding areas after surgery and/or chemotherapy.

For further information about this treatment see our **Radiotherapy** factsheet.

Targeted therapies

This is the name of a group of drugs that block the ways in which cancer cells grow and spread. The most well known targeted therapy at the moment is Herceptin (trastuzumab). Only people whose cancer has high levels of the HER2 protein (often referred to as HER2 positive) will benefit from taking Herceptin. As with chemotherapy, Herceptin can be given before or after surgery.

A sample of breast tissue taken during a biopsy or surgery will be used to test for HER2. For more information see our **Herceptin** factsheet.

Hormone therapy

Hormone therapy, also known as endocrine therapy, treats the whole body and prevents the hormones oestrogen and progesterone from stimulating the growth of breast cancer cells.

Although inflammatory breast cancer is less likely to be hormone sensitive (receptor positive breast cancer) than other types of breast cancer, this will be tested at the time of your diagnosis. If it is hormone sensitive, you will be offered hormone therapy to help stop the cancer coming back or spreading.

We have a range of factsheets about different hormone therapy drugs if you want to find out more.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are often used to assess the effectiveness of new treatments and research into treatments for inflammatory breast cancer is going on all the time. You may have heard about a clinical trial you would like to take part in, or you may have been asked by your doctors to take part in one. This is something you need to discuss carefully with your doctors so you can decide what's best for you.

For more information see our **Clinical trials** factsheet.

Coping with inflammatory breast cancer

Being diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer can be a very anxious and frightening time, as everything seems to happen so quickly. Some people feel as though they are on an emotional rollercoaster and that their life seems out of control.

Everybody reacts differently to their diagnosis and has their own way of coping. Many people find they can regain some sense of control by finding out as much as possible

about their condition and treatment. It is important that you feel able to talk to your specialist or breast care nurse about any questions, concerns or worries you may have.

There may be times when you feel alone or isolated, particularly as inflammatory breast cancer is a rare form of breast cancer. Remember that there are people who can support you so don't be afraid to ask for help. By letting other people know how you feel, particularly your family and friends, they can be more supportive.

You might also find it helpful to share your feelings with someone who has had a similar experience to you. You can do this either one to one or in a support group. If you would like to know more, call our freephone helpline or speak to your breast care nurse to find out about local support groups.

Alternatively, you may want to talk through your feelings in more depth with a professional counsellor. Your GP or specialist can usually arrange this.

Further help from Breast Cancer Care

For further medical information, emotional support, and details of our services, call our helpline free on **0808 800 6000** (for Typetalk prefix **18001**).

Breast Cancer Care's website has an email enquiries service called Ask the nurse, along with discussion forums and live chat sessions where you can share your views with people in a similar situation. For more information about these services and other online support, visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk.

In addition, our centres provide one-to-one support and other services, including: Healthy Living Days; Living with Breast Cancer courses; HeadStrong for people experiencing hair loss from chemotherapy; and Younger Women's Forums for the under 45s.

You can contact the centres as follows:

- **North & Midlands** Tel: 0845 077 1893
Email: nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk
- **London & South** Tel: 0845 077 1895
Email: src@breastcancercare.org.uk
- **Scotland** Tel: 0845 077 1892
Email: sco@breastcancercare.org.uk
- **Cymru/Wales** Tel: 0845 077 1894
Email: cym@breastcancercare.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care also has a wide range of publications to guide you from diagnosis to living well after treatment. You can download and order our publications at www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our helpline on **0808 800 6000** for a printed order form.

Other organisations

Cancerbackup

3 Bath Place, Rivington Street, London EC2A 3JR
Office: 020 7696 9003
Freephone helpline: 0808 800 1234
Email: info@cancerbackup.org
Website: www.cancerbackup.org.uk

Cancerbackup is the leading national information and support charity for people affected by cancer. Services include a helpline staffed by specialist cancer information nurses, a website, cancer information booklets and local information centres. All Cancerbackup services are free to people affected by cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Support

89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ
Telephone: 020 7840 7840
Macmillan CancerLine: 0808 808 2020
Textphone: 0808 808 0121
Email: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support is helping people who are living with cancer through the provision of immediate practical and emotional support. Specialist services include Macmillan nurses and doctors, cancer centres, a range of cancer information and direct financial help. The Macmillan CancerLine provides information and emotional support. Textphone available.

About Breast Cancer Care

Breast Cancer Care is the UK's leading provider of information, practical assistance and emotional support for anyone affected by breast cancer. Every year we respond to over two million requests for support and information about breast cancer or breast health concerns. All our services are free.

We are committed to campaigning for better treatment and support for people with breast cancer and their families.

For more information visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call the Breast Cancer Care helpline free on **0808 800 6000** (for Typetalk prefix **18001**). Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care.

This factsheet has been produced by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.

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