

The People's Clinic
The Marvin Proctor Research Center
on Minority Health

Wake Forest University Medical Center

Breast Cancer: Talking treatment

About 216,000 women will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer this year. According to the National Cancer Institute, though it is more common in white women, African American women experience higher death rates from breast cancer than any other racial or ethnic group. It is important to understand standard practices of treating breast cancer, which usually involves a combination of surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy and/or hormonal therapy. Depending on how advanced the stage of cancer, the specific treatments may differ significantly.

Ductal carcinoma In-Situ

Ductal carcinoma in situ is a condition characterized by abnormal cells in the milk ducts of the breast. It is called in situ (which means "in place") because the cells have not left their original location to invade the surrounding breast tissue. DCIS is not actually cancer but a 'pre-cancerous' condition. However, it is important to recognize because the abnormal cells could eventually turn into invasive cancer without treatment. Surgical treatment with or without radiation therapy is recommended for all women with DCIS. With proper diagnosis and treatment, DCIS is virtually 100 percent curable!

Depending on how far the DCIS has spread within the

ducts, the surgery can be either a mastectomy (in which the entire breast is removed) or breast conserving surgery (i.e. lumpectomy - in which only the abnormal tissue is removed). Regardless of which surgery women have, they should consider taking hormonal therapy, such as Tamoxifen, for five years to reduce the risk of recurrence of the cancer.

Early-stage breast cancer
Stage I or II breast cancer is the earliest, most treatable type of breast cancer. Although these tumors are invasive, which means that they have spread to the surrounding breast tissue, they tend to have a relatively low burden of cancer on the body. Typically, only small amounts of cancer have spread to the lymph nodes and/or other parts of the body. Stage I breast cancers are smaller than two centimeters and have not spread to the lymph nodes in the armpit (axillary nodes), while stage II cancers are either larger or have spread to the lymph nodes in the armpit. When appropriately treated, women with early breast cancer usually have a high rate of survival.

Over 95 percent of women with stage I cancer survive five years beyond their diagnosis, and close to 90 percent survive ten years. Among

those with stage II cancer, close to 85 percent survive five years, and approximately 65 percent survive ten years. Please see TALKING/3B

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