



# Ask about your medicines for primary (early) breast cancer

Questions to help you get the best from your drug treatments

# Ask about your medicines for primary (early) breast cancer

This guide is to help you understand your drug treatment for primary breast cancer (breast cancer that has not spread). It includes questions you might want to ask your doctors, nurses or hospital pharmacist. There is space for you to write down other questions you may have, and the answers you receive. Remember, not everything mentioned will apply to you because not all breast cancers are the same.

Don't feel that you have to ask all of your questions at once. Some of the answers will become clearer as you move through your treatment and you will be able to see your doctor or breast care nurse throughout.

If you need more information and support call the free Breast Cancer Care helpline on **0808 800 6000** (open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm, Saturday 9am-2pm). Calls can be answered in any language and there's a textphone on **0808 800 6001**. Our trained staff are on hand to talk about anything to do with your diagnosis or treatment. You can also visit Breast Cancer Care's website at **[www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)**.



**TIP:** There may be some words in this guide that you don't understand. You will find a word list on page 9.

Breast cancer can be treated in different ways and you may be given different options depending on the type of breast cancer you have.

This leaflet is about drug treatments for primary breast cancer, including chemotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy, but you may also need an operation and radiotherapy. For information about these other treatments call Breast Cancer Care's free helpline on 0808 800 6000 or visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk).

If you have just been told you have breast cancer you may be shocked or frightened and you may not be able to think straight. Understanding your treatment and making decisions can be difficult. You might want to decide for yourself what treatments to accept or ask for. Or you might prefer to leave all the treatment decisions to your doctor. There's no right or wrong way to go about it. Your doctor will tell you about the treatments available and their advantages and disadvantages. You can spend a few days thinking about your treatment options before you decide what you want to do. You will feel more in control of what's happening if you've had a chance to think things through and ask everything you want to know.

This guide is divided into three sections:

**Thinking about treatment**

**Choosing treatment**

**Having treatment**

Each section has questions you might want to ask at the different stages of your treatment.

# Thinking about treatment

Questions you can ask about your treatment for primary breast cancer before making any decisions

**Questions like these may be difficult to ask and there may not always be a definite answer.**

- What type of breast cancer do I have?
- What is the best way to treat it?
- Will I need an operation?
- Will the whole breast be removed?
- Will I need chemotherapy?
- Will I need radiotherapy?
- Will I need hormone therapy?
- Will I need any other treatment?
- How likely are the treatments to cure my breast cancer?
- What will happen if I don't have treatment?

**Always check if you are not sure about the type of breast cancer you have, so that you can understand the choices you are offered. These choices will depend on different factors that affect what treatments will work best for you.**

- How big is the breast cancer?
- Whereabouts in my breast is the cancer?
- What tests will be done on the breast cancer?
- How close are the cancer cells to the borders of the area taken out?
- What grade is the breast cancer?
- Is there any sign of the cancer in the lymph nodes in my armpit? If so, what does this mean?
- Is the breast cancer hormone receptor positive or negative?
- Do the cancer cells have high levels of a protein called HER2 which stimulates them to grow?
- What else can you tell me about my type of breast cancer?

**Getting information about your primary breast cancer and how it is treated can help you feel more in control of what is happening to you.**

- Has my case been discussed by a multi-disciplinary team?
- Are there any national guidelines for treating breast cancer that I should know about?
- Can I get a second opinion?
- Who can I contact if I have any more questions?

# Choosing treatment

Questions you can ask when choosing which drug treatments are best for you.

**Drug treatments for primary breast cancer are used to stop it spreading to other parts of the body and to prevent it coming back. They include chemotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy. You may have one or two of these, or all three. You may have them on their own or combined. Your doctor, breast care nurse or pharmacist will be able to tell you more.**

## Chemotherapy

- What benefit could I get from having chemotherapy and why?
- What drugs will I be having and when?
- Is this the best chemotherapy for me or are there other options?
- If this is the best chemotherapy for me, can you explain why?
- If there are other options, why aren't they being offered to me?
- Will I have injections? Drips? Tablets?
- What are the side effects?
- Will I still be able to have children after the chemotherapy?
- How long will the chemotherapy take and how often will each dose be given?
- What does it mean to take part in a clinical trial? Are there any clinical trials for chemotherapy I could take part in?
- How long might I take to recover?

## Hormone therapy

- Have you tested for oestrogen and progesterone receptors?
- Will I benefit from hormone therapy and why?
- What type of hormone therapy would be best for me? Are there any alternatives?
- If this is the best hormone therapy for me, can you explain why?
- If there are other options, why aren't they being offered to me?
- When should I start hormone therapy and how long will I take it for?
- What are the side effects?
- What does it mean to take part in a clinical trial? Are there any clinical trials for hormone therapy I could take part in?

## Targeted therapy

- Will you test if my breast cancer is HER2 positive?
- When will you do this?
- Will I benefit from a targeted cancer therapy such as Herceptin and why?
- How is Herceptin given?
- Are there any alternative treatments?
- How long will this treatment take and how often will each dose be given?
- What are the side effects?
- Are there any clinical trials for targeted therapies I could take part in?

# Having treatment

Questions you can ask once you have started your treatments.

## Knowing what to expect from your drug treatments can help you to cope.

- How will I know if the treatment is working?
- Do I need to change my lifestyle while on treatment?  
Can I drink alcohol? Can I eat what I want? Can I exercise?
- Can you control any side effects I experience while having my treatment?
- Are there any complementary therapies that might help?
- If my treatment is delayed or changed, will this make a difference?
- Can I change my mind after I've started treatment?
- What happens if my treatment doesn't work?
- What happens after the treatment finishes?

## It is a good idea to know who can help you if you have any problems or questions during your treatment.

- Who are my main contacts while I have my treatment?
- Will my GP be told what treatment I am having and why I am having it?
- Who should I contact if I have any problems?
- When and how should I contact them?
- Can I contact them in the evening? At night? Over weekends?
- Who should I contact in an emergency?
- Can I see a counsellor?
- Is there a local support group I could join?
- Where can I get further information?

# Word list

Here are explanations for unfamiliar words – ask your doctor or nurse if you want them explained further.

**Chemotherapy:** the treatment of cancer with toxic drugs.

**Clinical trial:** research studies that test how safe and effective different types of treatment are.

**Complementary therapies:** non-conventional therapies that are used alongside conventional treatments.

**Grade:** the system used to classify cancer cells, from grade 1 (most like normal cells) to grade 3 (most changed).

**HER2:** a protein that stimulates breast cancers to grow.

**HER2 status:** HER2+ (HER2 positive) means the breast cancer has too many HER2 receptors. HER2- (HER2 negative) means the breast cancer has normal levels of HER2 receptors.

**Hormone receptor:** a protein on a cell's surface that attracts a particular hormone and uses it to help the cell grow. Breast cancers may have oestrogen and/or progesterone receptors.

**Hormones:** chemical messengers produced in various organs of the body that regulate growth and reproduction.

**Hormone therapy:** drug treatment that treats the whole body and stops the hormones oestrogen and progesterone from helping breast cancer cells to grow. Also called endocrine therapy.

**Lymph nodes:** hundreds of small oval bodies that contain lymph fluid.

**Multi-disciplinary team:** a team of healthcare professionals, each with their own expertise, involved in the care of people with breast cancer.

**Radiotherapy:** the use of high energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells.

**Targeted therapy:** the name for a group of drugs that block the growth and spread of cancer by changing the biology of the cancer cells.

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# 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. All our services are free. If you need further information and support call the free Breast Cancer Care helpline on **0808 800 6000** (textphone **0808 800 6001**). If you'd like to talk to someone who's had breast cancer we'll do our best to put you in touch with one of our trained volunteers. And you can always look at the website: **[www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)**. There you'll find information on all aspects of breast cancer or you can join an online chat or order some of our free booklets. Breast Cancer Care also runs courses and activities around the country. Find out what's happening near you by calling our free helpline or contacting your nearest centre (details below).

## Centres

Breast Cancer Care Scotland  
Telephone 0845 077 1892  
Email [sco@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:sco@breastcancercare.org.uk)

Breast Cancer Care North & Midlands  
Telephone 0845 077 1893  
Email [nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk)

Breast Cancer Care Cymru/Wales  
Telephone 0845 077 1894  
Email [cym@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:cym@breastcancercare.org.uk)

Breast Cancer Care London & South  
Telephone 0845 077 1895  
Email [src@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:src@breastcancercare.org.uk)

**Ask About Medicines** is the independent campaign to increase people's involvement in decisions about their use of medicines.  
[www.askaboutmedicines.org](http://www.askaboutmedicines.org)

## Other useful organisations

Cancerbackup - Freephone helpline 0808 800 1234 [www.cancerbackup.org.uk](http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk)  
Macmillan Cancer Support - Macmillan CancerLine 0808 808 2020 [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

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