

"Frontiers in Breast Care"



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Inflammatory Breast Cancer

Breast Cancer Without Lumps

If I told you that you could have breast cancer without ever having any palpable lumps in your breasts, it might be difficult for you to believe. However, one rare form of breast cancer called inflammatory breast cancer or IBC rarely causes the solid lump tumors that we're used to hearing about. In fact, this type of breast cancer typically forms as sheets or webs of tumor that are difficult to detect. Breast self-exams and mammograms offer little to no value in diagnosing IBC. Correct diagnosis of this type of breast cancer is rare the first time a woman visits her healthcare provider when she has the signs and symptoms of inflammatory breast cancer. It is quite common that women with IBC first receive a diagnosis of infection in the breast one or more times. Sadly, because this type of breast cancer is the fastest growing type, by the time diagnosis occurs, inflammatory breast cancer has usually reached its later stages.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of Inflammatory Breast Cancer?

Some of the first signs of inflammatory breast cancer often include red, swollen, itchy or otherwise irritated breasts. Other signs and symptoms of IBC include:

- A sudden increase in breast size; usually one breast becomes noticeably larger than the other.
- Sudden warmth or heat that is felt upon touching the affected breast.
- Constant itching or pain in the breast.
- Nipple changes such as suddenly inverted or flattened nipples or discharge from the nipples.
- Changes in the skin of the affected breast, such as thickening or ridging that may include dimpling that is textured and looks like an orange peel. This is called *peau d'orange*.
- A change in the color of the areola; the areola is the dark area of skin that surrounds the nipple.
- One or more bruises on one or both breasts.
- Swollen lymph nodes under the arm or neck.

Who is at Risk for Developing Inflammatory Breast Cancer?

An estimated one to six percent of new breast cancer cases are inflammatory breast cancer. African American women are slightly more likely than Caucasian women to

have IBC. In fact, up to ten percent of all cases of new breast cancer in African American women are inflammatory breast cancer while only six percent of new breast cancers in Caucasian women are IBC, and about five percent of new breast cancers in women of all other races are of this type.

Inflammatory breast cancer occurs more often in much younger women than more common forms of breast cancer. Pregnant or breastfeeding women are not immune to IBC and the disease is often seen in this group of women. Men also can have inflammatory breast cancer, as well as other types of breast cancer. Breast Cancer, including IBC, is seen in men an estimated 1,600 times annually in the U.S.

Treatments for Inflammatory Breast Cancer

The basic treatment plan for IBC is first several rounds of systemic treatments such as chemotherapy, hormone therapy, or both. Systemic treatments work by treating the whole body and killing cancer cells that have metastasized. Next radiation therapy, surgery, or both follow chemotherapy to shrink or rid the breasts of any remaining treatments such as chemotherapy, hormone therapy, or biological therapy.

Is IBC an Automatic Death Sentence?

Absolutely not! There's always hope, and advancements in treatment of inflammatory breast cancer have increased the five year survival rate for patients to about 50% and the ten year survival rate to approximately 35%. Like many types of cancer, as with other diseases, having a strong and positive attitude can do a great deal of good towards increasing survivability.

Early diagnosis and treatment saves lives. Inform your patients to see a healthcare provider immediately if they experience any of the signs or symptoms of inflammatory breast cancer. If a patient is prescribed antibiotics and they haven't improved significantly in one week, they should insist on a biopsy to determine whether they have any cancer cells.

Source: Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

Facts About Breast Cancer:

- 180,510 Americans will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year.
- 40,910 Americans will die from breast cancer this year. It is the third-leading cause of cancer death for women in the United States.
- When caught in its earliest stages, breast cancer can be cured in 80% of women.
- Yearly mammograms are recommended for all women older than 50.
- Never ignore a lump or change in the look or feel of the breast.

