

Male Breast Cancer Similar to Breast Cancer in Women

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Background and importance of the study: Most people tend to think of breast cancer as a woman's disease. But men get breast cancer too. According to the American Cancer Society, about 1200 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed in American men each year (compared to about 200,000 cases of breast cancer in U.S. women).

We need to learn much more about breast cancer in men, and how it responds to various treatments, in order to improve the diagnosis and therapy for men who have this disease.

This study tried to shed some light on male breast cancer by examining what happened to 93 men with the disease.

Study designs: Portuguese researchers looked over the medical records of 93 men who developed breast cancer between 1974 and 2002. From this information, they determined:

- the most common kinds of breast cancers the men developed,
- the average time between first symptom and diagnosis,
- the most common treatments,
- how long the men lived after treatment, and
- what factors influenced their survival.

The researchers also looked at how many men had family members with cancer, including breast cancer.

Study results: In the men studied, the most common type of breast cancer was invasive, or infiltrating, ductal carcinoma (IDC). That's also the most common type in women.

It may sound strange that men can develop cancer in milk duct tissue. But men do have all the same types of tissue in their breasts that women do. They just have many fewer ducts and lobules, and these are not as developed as they are in women.

In this study, 68 of the men had had their cancers tested for hormone receptors. Of these, about half were positive for both estrogen and progesterone receptors. Most of the cancers were considered moderately aggressive, based on [tumor grade](#) (Grade II). Most men in the study (78%) were treated with surgery, and 68% also received treatment to lower the risk of the cancer coming back, including radiation therapy (57%), chemotherapy (13%), and hormonal therapy (41%).

The average time between first symptom and diagnosis was 19 months, or over a year and a half. (That's a very long time!) This is probably because people don't expect breast cancer to happen to men, so there is little to no early detection:

Related Areas:

[See pictures](#) of infiltrating ductal carcinoma (IDC) and other types of breast cancer.

- men don't perform self-examination,
- it's unusual for doctors to perform a routine breast examination in a man, and
- there is no such thing as screening mammography for men.

In this study, 65% of the men were alive 5 years after diagnosis and 51% were alive after 10 years. One-quarter (25%) of the men had a family history of cancer, and 12% had other family members with breast cancer.

We know that breast cancer is more common in men when they have an abnormality in the breast cancer gene BRCA2. But this study did not look at whether the men had this abnormality.

Conclusion: The researchers concluded that their results were similar to those of others who have studied male breast cancer. The diagnosis of breast cancer in men took a lot longer to establish than it usually does in women. Despite this delay, many of the men were able to survive their cancers. The researchers suggested that the use of radiation therapy, hormonal therapy, and chemotherapy may have helped make up for the delay in diagnosis.

Take-home message: Although it is quite rare for men to develop breast cancer, it's important to know that it CAN happen. Men's breast cancer is similar to women's: Cancer of the milk pipes is the most common type, and most respond well to treatment.

But in men the diagnosis is often delayed, and many men feel embarrassed about having what others might consider a "woman's" disease. It's very important to realize that men need the same information and deserve the same levels of support and compassion as women with this disease.

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While this study adds to our general understanding of male breast cancer, there's a lot more room for improvement. Earlier diagnosis could make a life-saving difference. With more research and more public awareness, men will learn that -- just like women -- they need to go to their doctor right away if they detect any lumps in their breasts.

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