



# Getting to grips with the stages of breast cancer

## What is staging in breast cancer?

Cancer staging refers to the process of determining how much cancer you have in your body and where it is located. It is used to work out the severity of a person's cancer, from the original tumour to the extent at which it has spread elsewhere in the body.<sup>1</sup>

When doctors diagnose breast cancer, they use the TNM classification to give it a stage from 1 to 4 (usually written in roman numerals like in the table on page 2). In most cases, the stage is based on factors such as the size of the tumour and whether it has spread to the lymph nodes, surrounding tissue or other parts of the body. The higher the stage, the more likely that:<sup>2</sup>

- The tumour is larger
- The cancer has spread to other parts of the body or to the lymph nodes (small bean-shaped glands that are a part of the immune system and found throughout the body<sup>3</sup>)



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## Why is staging important?

Staging gives your multidisciplinary team (MDT) an indication of the severity of your cancer and therefore an idea of which treatment is appropriate for you. For example, if your cancer is stage I (just in one place in your body), your MDT will likely give you a total mastectomy, lumpectomy plus radiation or very occasionally, lumpectomy alone.<sup>4</sup>

Your doctor will take many different factors into account when deciding which treatment is best for you.

Treatment may include:<sup>5</sup>

- surgery
- radiotherapy
- chemotherapy
- hormone therapy
- targeted cancer drugs
- bisphosphonates

## TNM classification

The TNM Classification is a system used to classify a malignancy. Its primary use is assisting the prognostic cancer staging of solid tumours.<sup>6</sup> It allows healthcare professionals to assess the tumour, regional lymph nodes and distant metastasis.

The TNM staging system is the most common way to stage breast cancer in the UK. Doctors may also use a number staging system.<sup>5</sup>

### T – Tumour

T is followed by a number from 0 to 4 to describe the primary tumour's size and if it has spread to the skin or to the chest wall under the breast. Higher T numbers mean a larger tumour and/or wider spread to tissues near the breast.<sup>6</sup>

### N – Nodes

N is used to describe regional lymph node involvement of the tumour. Lymph nodes work as biological filters, as fluid from body tissues is absorbed into lymphatic capillaries and flows to the lymph nodes.<sup>6</sup>

### M – Metastasis

M is used to identify the presence of distant metastases of the primary tumour, when the tumour spreads beyond regional lymph nodes.<sup>6</sup>

## What are the stages?

| If you hear...                                                                                      | It usually means...                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Stage I breast cancer</b><br>Also known as primary (PBC) or early breast cancer.                 | Stage 1 breast cancer (localised cancer) means that the cancer is small and only in the breast tissue or it might be found in very small areas of the lymph nodes close to the breast. <sup>1</sup> |
| <b>Stage II breast cancer</b>                                                                       | Stage 2 breast cancer (locally advanced cancer, early stages) means that the cancer is either in the breast or in the nearby lymph nodes or both. <sup>1</sup>                                      |
| <b>Stage III breast cancer</b>                                                                      | Stage 3 breast cancer (locally advanced cancer, late stages) means that the cancer has spread from the breast to the lymph nodes close to the breast. <sup>1</sup>                                  |
| <b>Stage IV breast cancer</b><br>Also known as advanced (ABC), secondary (SBC) or metastatic (METS) | Stage 4 breast cancer means that the cancer has spread to other parts of the body such as the bones and lungs. <sup>1</sup>                                                                         |

## Other cancer staging terms you might hear

### Breast cancer recurrence

Breast cancer is considered recurrent when the original cancer has come back after treatment. It can come back months or years after it has been treated. Once it has spread to another part of your body, it is known as recurrent secondary breast cancer.<sup>7</sup>

### Breast cancer progression

Breast cancer progression is where the breast cancer continues to grow or spread despite treatment, as shown on imaging tests or physical examination of the tumour. A person might have active cancer at times or have cancer that is in remission at other times. Many different treatments – alone, in combination, or in a sequence – are often used to slow the progression of the disease.<sup>8</sup>

### De novo breast cancer

When your initial diagnosis is secondary, or advanced, breast cancer, it means that the cancer has already spread to another part of your body before it was found in your breast. Your doctor may call this de novo metastatic breast cancer. De novo means from the beginning.<sup>9</sup>

### Reporting of side effects

If you get any side effects, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. This includes any possible side effects not listed in the package leaflet. You can also report side effects directly via the Yellow Card Scheme at <https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk/>

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