Metastatic Breast Cancer

What is metastatic breast cancer?

Metastatic breast cancer (also called Stage IV or Advanced) is cancer that has spread from the place where it first started in the breast to another place in your body. The cancer cells enter your lymphatic system or your blood and spread to other parts of your body. The most common places for breast cancer to spread is to your bones, brain, lungs and liver.

Metastatic cancer has the same name and the same type of cancer cells as your primary breast cancer. For example, breast cancer that spreads to the lungs and forms a tumor is called metastatic breast cancer, not lung cancer. Sometimes the cancer cells can change, so your doctor may want to do a biopsy of the metastatic tumor to help find the best treatment for you. Metastatic breast cancer can be treated, but not cured.

What are the symptoms of metastatic breast cancer?

The kind of symptoms you may have will depend on the size and location of the metastatic tumor. If the cancer has spread to your bones, it may cause pain in your bones or bone fractures. Cancer that has spread to your brain can cause headaches, seizures and problems with balance. Shortness of breath, cough or chest pain may be a sign of that the cancer has spread to your lung. Swelling of your abdomen or jaundice (yellowing of your skin) can be a sign that the cancer has spread to your liver.
What treatments are available?

Treatment can help prevent or slow the growth of the tumor and reduce your symptoms. Metastatic breast cancer may be treated with systemic therapy. Systemic therapy uses medicines or treatments to kill cancer cells anywhere in your body. These treatments include hormone therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy and radiation therapy.

Metastatic breast cancer may also be treated with surgery, radiation therapy or a combination of these treatments. Your treatment choices will depend on:

- Your type of primary cancer
- The size, location and number of metastatic tumors
- Your age and general health
- Your past treatments

The most common treatments are:

- **Hormone Therapy** - This treatment harms or destroys tumors that need hormones (estrogen or progesterone) to grow. This treatment has fewer side effects than chemotherapy and the benefits of the treatment may last longer. If you have had this therapy in the past, other medicines may be used.

- **Chemotherapy** - If hormone therapy is not an option, then chemotherapy will be used. This treatment kills cancer cells and slows the growth of the tumor. If you had chemotherapy in the past, you may be treated with another chemotherapy medicine or a combination of medicines.

- **Targeted Therapy** - This type of treatment uses medicines or other substances, such as monoclonal antibodies, to find and kill specific cancer cells. Targeted therapy may have different side effects than other cancer treatments.

- **Radiation Therapy** - This treatment uses high doses of radiation to kill cancer cells and stop them from spreading. It may also be used to reduce cancer symptoms. Radiation therapy is used most often to reduce pain when cancer has spread to your bone. The number of radiation treatments you get will depend on what part of your body is being treated.

Surgery is rarely used to treat metastatic breast cancer.
Are new treatments being developed?
Research is being done to find new ways to kill or stop the growth of metastatic cancer cells. Before a new treatment can be used, researchers must make sure it is safe and works well to treat cancer.

Clinical trials are research studies that help to find ways to prevent, screen or treat cancer. Being part of a clinical trial may give you early access to new medicines and treatments. If you decide that you no longer want to take part in a clinical trial, you can stop at any time. Talk to your doctor if you would like more information about clinical trials and ask for the patient education handout, Clinical Trials at The James.

What if I want to stop treatment?
You may decide to stop your treatment and focus on care that gives you comfort, emotional support and reduces your symptoms to help you live each day to the fullest. This is called palliative care and can be helpful at any time during your illness.

Other resources that you may find helpful:
- Coping with Advanced Cancer
- When Cancer Returns
- Metastatic Breast Cancer Series – Guide for the Newly Diagnosed

Adapted from: Metastatic Cancer Fact Sheet, National Cancer Institute