Metastatic Breast Cancer

What is metastatic breast cancer?
Metastatic cancer (also called Stage IV or Advanced) is cancer that has spread from the place where it first started to another place in the body. The cancer cells enter the lymphatic system or the bloodstream and spread to other parts in the body. The most common places for breast cancer to spread are the bone, brain, lung and liver.

Metastatic cancer has the same name and the same type of cancer cells as your primary cancer. For example, breast cancer that spreads to the lungs and forms a tumor is called metastatic breast cancer, not lung cancer. Sometimes the makeup of breast cancer cells can change, so your doctor may want to do a biopsy of the metastatic tumor to make sure the cells are like the ones found in your primary cancer.

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 the bones, it may cause pain in the bones. Cancer that has spread to the brain can cause headaches, seizures and problems with balance. Shortness of breath may be a sign of that the cancer has spread to the lung. Swelling of your abdomen or jaundice (yellowing of the skin) can be a sign that the cancer has spread to the liver.

What treatments are available?
There is no cure for metastatic cancer, but treatment can help prevent or slow the growth of the tumor and reduce your symptoms. Metastatic cancer may be treated with systemic therapy (a treatment that goes throughout the body). These treatments include endocrine (hormone) therapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy radiation therapy.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

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Metastatic 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:

- **Endocrine (Hormone) Therapy** - This treatment helps patients with tumors that have hormone receptors that are ER+ and PR+. This treatment has fewer side effects than chemotherapy and the benefits of the treatment may last longer. If you have had endocrine therapy in the past, other drugs may be given.

- **Chemotherapy** - If endocrine therapy is not an option, then chemotherapy will be given. This treatment kills cancer cells and reduces the growth of the tumor. If you had chemotherapy in the past, you may be treated with another chemotherapy drug or a combination of drugs.

- **Targeted Therapy** - This type of treatment uses drugs or other substances, such as monoclonal antibodies, to find and attack specific cancer cells. Targeted therapy may have fewer side effects than other cancer treatments. Trastuzumab and Lapatinib are two drugs being used for patients with HER-2 positive tumor cells.

- **Radiation Therapy** - Radiation therapy can be given to reduce symptoms from cancer that has spread. It is most commonly given to reduce pain from cancer that has spread to the bone. Radiation treatments are given over a short period of time (5 to 10 days).

Surgery is not used very often to treat metastatic breast cancer. The tumors are located in a number of places, which makes it hard to remove the cancer using surgery.

**Are new treatments being developed?**

Researchers are studying new ways to kill or stop the growth of metastatic cancer cells. Before a new treatment can be made widely
available to patients, it must be studied in a clinical trial and found to be safe and effective in treating disease.

Taking part in a clinical trial may help you and may also help improve treatment for patients in the future. Being part of a clinical trial may give you early access to new drugs 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 treatment and focus on care that provides comfort, emotional support and symptom management 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