

Sometimes, despite the best treatment efforts, breast cancer grows and spreads to other parts of the body (called metastatic breast cancer). Although metastatic breast cancer cannot be cured, it can be treated.

Treatment with chemotherapy or hormone therapy can control tumor growth and prolong life. For some people, this period of active treatment of the cancer may last for many years.

At some point, however, treatment will no longer work. Sometimes, treatment side effects are worse than the benefits. Talk to your doctor about your treatment plan. At some time, you may choose to stop treatment.

This decision varies for each person. Only you can decide when it is best to stop treatment. Anger, fear, sadness and grief are all common feelings. There are resources that can help you and your loved ones during this time. (Resources are listed on the back of this sheet.)

Palliative care

Palliative [pal-ee-uh-tiv] care is care that focuses on relieving or preventing symptoms caused by a serious illness rather than treating a disease. The main goal of palliative care is to provide comfort and a high quality of life. Palliative care treats the whole person: body, mind and soul. This means treatment to control pain and other physical symptoms as well as care for emotional and spiritual needs.

Palliative care is part of treatment for all people with breast cancer, no matter what stage, but it is very important for those with metastatic breast cancer. When treatment ends, palliative care becomes the main focus.

A hospital social worker can tell you about these services in your area.

Hospice

Hospice provides humane and compassionate care for people at the end stages of life. It includes and extends beyond palliative care. It focuses on the total care and support of people near the end of life and their loved ones. Hospice services may include:

- Comfort care (like symptom control)
- Emotional, social and spiritual support
- Daily care support
- Grief counseling

Hospice care is given by teams of trained professionals, volunteers and family members. Hospice is not a place where you go to die as many think. It is a type of care. Hospice care is given at home, at a hospice facility or at a hospital. A social worker can tell you about these services in your area.

Talking about death

Perhaps one of the hardest things to do is talk about dying with your loved ones. There is no “right” way to talk about death. By saying, “I know that I am dying,” can give others permission to talk openly with you. Family members and friends may seem uncomfortable at first. Often, they want to talk but are afraid of upsetting you or saying the wrong thing. The more open that you are with your feelings, the more comfortable they will become. Hospital social workers and hospice workers may also be able to help you open the lines of communication.

Your legal rights

End-of-life choices vary greatly from person to person and may change over time. One major concern people have is that the end of their lives be a time spent with dignity rather than getting unwanted treatments. You have legal rights at this time. You have the choice of where and how you want your treatment to be handled should you not be able to express your wishes. But you must write a legal document (called an advance directive) if you want to protect your rights and make your choices known. Writing an advance directive can save your loved ones the stress of making some hard choices during this time.

There are two parts to an advance directive. Each state has its own legal requirements so you should get legal advice. You can change or cancel advance directives at any time.

Resources

Caregiver Action Network — support and information for caregivers.

1-202-454-3970

caregiveraction.org

Email: info@caregiveraction.org

CaringInfo — provides information and support for anyone who is planning ahead, care giving, living with a serious illness or grieving a loss.

1-800-658-8898

www.caringinfo.org

CancerCare® — provides online support, information, and referrals for people at all stages of cancer.

1-800-813-HOPE

www.cancercares.org

Hospice Foundation of America — gives information on hospice.

www.hospicefoundation.org

Komen Perspectives — *Making Informed Decisions About End-Of-Life Care — The Role of Palliative Care and Hospice*

www.komen.org

- **Living Will** — This lists which treatments should be given or withheld (such as life support) and under what circumstances. It can be very specific or general.

- **Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care (Medical Power of Attorney)** — This allows you to appoint a person to make health care decisions on your behalf should you no longer be able to do so yourself.

Copies of these documents should be given to your lawyer, doctor, hospital and family. It also helps to keep a copy with you.



Related fact sheets in this series:

- Clinical Trials
- Integrative and Complementary Therapies
- Getting the Support You Need
- Metastatic Breast Cancer

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.