What Does a Diagnosis of Metastatic Breast Cancer Mean?

Metastatic breast cancer or Stage IV is invasive breast cancer that has spread beyond the breast and nearby lymph nodes. You may hear the words “advanced”, “mets” and “metastatic” used to describe stage IV breast cancer that has metastasized or traveled through the bloodstream to create tumors in the liver, lungs, brain, bones and/or other parts of the body.

The dominance of the ‘breast cancer survivor’ identity masks the reality that patients treated for early stage breast cancer can experience a metastatic recurrence … anywhere from a few months to 20 years or more after an initial diagnosis.

Metastatic breast cancer (MBC) is incurable but treatable. Between 20 and 30 percent of women with early stage breast cancer go on to develop MBC, and for 6% of breast cancer survivors, MBC is an initial diagnosis. Public messaging about the ‘cure’ and survivorship is so pervasive that people diagnosed at stage 4 with MBC can be stigmatized by the perception that they’ve failed to take care of themselves or undergo annual screening. In a culture focused on survivorship, those with metastatic breast cancer can feel isolated and misunderstood.

A diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer can be frightening and overwhelming. It is understandable to experience a range of emotions when you are first diagnosed. It’s normal to feel fear, shock, sadness, anger and depression. An estimated 155,000-plus women (and men) in the U.S. are currently living with metastatic, stage 4 breast cancer. You do not have to face this alone. Social support from family, friends, and others may improve your emotional well-being and quality of life. Social workers and counselors who specialize in breast cancer are available to provide guidance and support.

There are places to go for free support groups, education and information. The Breast Cancer Network of Western New York (BCN) hosts a metastatic support group twice each month and has a library which contains a section of metastatic materials and an extensive list of local and national resources available to you. Roswell Park Cancer Institute also has a Breast Resource Center (716-845-4432) available to the public containing information for those living with a metastatic diagnozis.

The Breast Cancer Network’s professionally led metastatic support group meets every other Tuesday from 12-1:20 PM at their Bella Moglie facility, 3297 Walden Avenue in Depew. Call 716-706-0060 for the next meeting or stop in to browse through their library.

There are many treatment options available to metastatic patients. You might want to get a second opinion by speaking with another oncologist and/or someone from a major cancer center like Roswell Park Cancer Institute Breast Clinic (716-845-3188) to clarify your treatment possibilities. Just as your lifestyle depends on your individual needs, your decision to discuss your breast cancer with your friends and family depends on your situation. Usually, people just state they “have breast cancer.” Remember, there are no right or wrong choices. Reach out to family and friends in whatever way you feel comfortable.

Today, more and more women and men with metastatic breast cancer are living longer, meaningful and productive lives. While the search for a cure still continues, rest assured that metastatic breast cancer can be effectively controlled for extended periods of time with ongoing treatment.

Advocacy Committee, Breast Cancer Network of WNY