Male breast cancer

This factsheet discusses the main aspects of male breast cancer, including what we know about why it happens, how it is diagnosed, the treatments and some ways of coping with the disease. We hope that it helps you to discuss any questions you might have with your specialist team, and helps you take part in your treatment plan. We recommend that you read this along with Action Breast Cancer's booklet *Understanding Cancer of the Breast*. Although the booklet is aimed at women, much of the information is relevant to men.

**HOW ARE MEN'S BREASTS DIFFERENT TO WOMEN'S?**

Many people are not aware that men can get breast cancer because they do think of men as having breasts. Actually both men and women have breast tissue. Until puberty, both girls and boys have similar breasts with some small ducts under the nipple. With the onset of puberty in girls, female hormones cause their breasts to grow and milk producing glands or lobes are formed at the end of the ducts. In boys, male hormones prevent breasts from growing and although there may be some increase in tissue, lobules are not properly formed as there is no requirement for milk production.

**WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF BREAST CANCER IN MEN?**

Breast cancer in men is uncommon, with about 16 men diagnosed each year in Ireland. As with breast cancer in women, the causes of male breast cancer are not known. However, we do know about some risk factors, the most important being increasing age. In rare circumstances, high oestrogen levels, Klinefelter’s syndrome, exposure to radiation or a family history/genetic link may play a small part.

**Age**

As in female breast cancer, increasing age is the main risk factor. Most men who get breast cancer are over 60, although younger men can be affected.

**High oestrogen levels**

High oestrogen levels can occur as a result of chronic liver damage, obesity and some genetic conditions.

**Obesity**

Although not fully understood, being very overweight (obese) seems to increase the risk of male breast cancer especially over 35 years of age, this may be related to a higher oestrogen level in the body.

**Klinefelter's syndrome**

This is a rare genetic condition where a man is born with an extra female chromosome. For
Men who have this syndrome the risk of breast cancer is 20 times greater than the average.

**Radiation**

Men who have had repeated and prolonged exposure to radiation, i.e. radiotherapy treatment to the chest wall (particularly when young), are thought to be at increased risk of developing breast cancer.

**Family history/genetic link**

An increased risk of breast cancer is seen in men with a family history of female breast cancer. This includes mother or sister, particularly if the relative was under 40 when diagnosed. Approximately 5% of all breast cancers in women are thought to have a genetic link. A genetic link in men seems to be more common. Genetic testing is available for people with a strong family history of breast cancer. For more information on family history call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40 and ask for our factsheet on Hereditary Breast Cancer.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

Because male breast cancer is rare, a man might ignore his symptoms and put off seeing his GP. This means that in some cases the cancer is already advanced when it is diagnosed. The earlier breast cancer is treated the better, so it is important to get any symptoms checked out as soon as possible.

Most men go to their GP with a painless lump in the breast. Other symptoms include nipple discharge (often blood stained), a tender or drawn in nipple, ulceration or swelling of the breast. Occasionally, the lymph glands under the arm may also be swollen.

**HOW IS A DIAGNOSIS MADE?**

Once you have seen your GP, you will be referred to a specialist breast unit where you will be seen first by a doctor or specialist nurse practitioner. Following a physical examination you may have other tests such as:

- mammogram – x-ray of the breast
- ultrasound – scan of the breast creating a picture of the breast using sound waves.
- fine needle aspiration – cells are taken from the lump using a fine needle and syringe
- core biopsy – a small piece of tissue is removed under a local anaesthetic and looked at under the microscope.

To check that the cancer has not spread to other parts of the body, you may have further tests such as a chest X-ray, liver ultrasound or bone scan.

For more information on these tests contact the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40. 

**WHAT TREATMENT WILL I BE OFFERED?**

Treatment for men with breast cancer tends to be the same as that for women. The treatment offered to you will depend on several factors such as the type of tumour, the stage of the disease and your general health. The main treatment used is surgery, either alone or in combination with radiotherapy, hormone therapy and/or chemotherapy.

**Surgery**

This is usually the first treatment. Mastectomy (removal of the breast tissue) is most commonly done. This may mean removing some of the underlying muscle if involved in the cancer or is close to it. Removal of the lump and surrounding tissue only (wide local excision) is not usually possible because men only have a small amount of breast tissue. The lymph glands in the axilla (armpit) are also likely to be removed. In some cases a test called a sentinel lymph node biopsy is performed to find out if there is any spread to the nodes or glands.

**Radiotherapy**

The aim of radiotherapy is to reduce the risk of the tumour coming back in the treated area. It is given to the chest wall following a wide local excision, and to the lymph glands in the armpit. If you have a mastectomy, you may not need radiotherapy.

For further information, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40 and ask for our factsheet on Radiotherapy.
Hormone therapy
All men produce a very small amount of oestrogen, which is mainly a female hormone. Most male breast cancers need oestrogen to grow, so the tumours tend to respond well to hormone treatment. The drug most commonly used is tamoxifen, which blocks the effects of oestrogen on breast cancer cells so stopping them from growing. Other hormone drugs known as aromatase inhibitors may also be effective. Hormonal therapies have side effects and men can also experience them, similar to women. The most common for men being hot flushes, loss of libido (sex drive) and headaches. These side effects usually become less noticeable over time as the body adapts to the drug. You will be given more information by your Doctor in relation to the specific drug you are prescribed for.

For further information, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40 and ask for our factsheet on Chemotherapy.

Targeted therapies
There are some newer drugs available, which may also be prescribed for you called targeted therapies. These drugs work by blocking the growth and spread of cancer by changing the biology of cancer cells. The most well known is a drug called Herceptin (Trastuzumab). This one is only suitable for people whose cancer has high levels of iHer2i, a protein that encourages cancer cell growth.

COPING WITH BREAST CANCER
Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be a very anxious and frightening time. At different times during the course of your diagnosis and treatment you may experience a range of other emotions such as shock, disbelief or anger. These feelings are common; everybody responds differently and has their own way of coping.

You may find things particularly difficult because breast cancer is more usually associated with women, and you may feel embarrassed about discussing your diagnosis with others. You may also feel very much alone, as there seems to be nobody else in the same situation that you can look to for support.

Whatever your circumstances, try not to bottle up your feelings or cope on your own. Remember that there are people there who can support you, so don’t be afraid to ask for help. You might find it helpful to read other relevant booklets such as Understanding Breast Cancer and Talking about your Cancer.

Many people find that they can get back some sense of control by finding out as much as possible about their condition and treatment. It is important that you feel you can talk to your specialist or breast care nurse about any questions or concerns you may have.

The Irish Cancer Society funds a counselling service. A counsellor will provide emotional support by allowing you to express your feelings and fears. Counselling may help you to see things differently, and help you through a difficult patch. You may be able to express worries or concerns to a counsellor that you do not wish to discuss with others.

For further information, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40 and ask for our factsheet on Tamoxifen.
HELP FROM ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, provides breast cancer information and support, and funds breast cancer research. Our services are free, confidential and accessible.

For more information, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline Freefone on 1800 30 90 40 or visit www.cancer.ie/action.

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer
43 / 45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline: 1800 30 90 40
Email: abc@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society
43 / 45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline: 1800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

Reach to Recovery
43 / 45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline: 1800 30 90 40

Voluntary Health Insurance
VHI House
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Callsave: 1800 44 44 44
Email: info@vhi.ie

QUINN-healthcare
Mill Island
Fermoy
Co. Cork
Local: 1890 70 08 90
Email: info@quinn-healthcare.com
Website: www.quinn-healthcare.com

Hibernian Health
PO Box 764
Freepost
Togher
Co. Cork
Phone: 1850 71 66 66
Email: support@hibernianhealthinsurance.ie
Website: www.hibernian.ie

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society
www.cancer.ie
Breast Cancer Care UK
www.breastcancercare.org.uk
American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org
The Susan G. Komen Foundation
www.komen.org
Europa Donna
www.cancereurope.org/europadonna
Lymphodema Ireland
www.lymphireland.com
Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland
www.mldireland.com

ABC – ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

• National Breast Cancer Helpline 1800 30 90 40 – staffed by specialist cancer nurses.
• Patient care programmes – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer.
• Health Promotion – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle.
• Advocacy – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland.
• Professional support – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients.
• Research – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work or make a donation please contact us.

Freefone Helpline
1800 30 90 40

First published by the Irish Cancer Society in November 2007
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Updated July 2008
Review Date 2010
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