
CANCER FACTS

National Cancer Institute • National Institutes of Health
Department of Health and Human Services

Inflammatory Breast Cancer

Key Points

- Inflammatory breast cancer is an uncommon type of breast cancer.
- This disease occurs when cancer cells block the lymph vessels in the skin of the breast, causing the breast to become red, swollen, and warm.
- Inflammatory breast cancer usually grows rapidly and often spreads to other parts of the body.
- Treatment usually starts with chemotherapy, generally followed by surgery and/or radiation.

Inflammatory breast cancer is an uncommon type of breast cancer in which breast cancer cells block the lymph vessels in the skin of the breast. This blockage may cause the breast to become red, swollen, and warm. The skin of the breast may also appear pink, purple, or bruised, and it may have ridges or appear pitted, like the skin of an orange (called *peau d'orange*). These changes often occur quickly over a period of weeks. Another possible sign of this type of breast cancer is swollen lymph nodes under the arm, above the collarbone, or in both places. Often, a tumor cannot be felt, and may not be seen on a mammogram. The diagnosis of inflammatory breast cancer is based on the results of the biopsy and the doctor's clinical judgment.



Inflammatory breast cancer generally grows rapidly, and the cancer cells often spread to other parts of the body. A woman with inflammatory breast cancer usually has local treatment to remove or destroy the cancer in the breast and systemic treatment to control or kill cancer cells that may have spread to other parts of the body. Local treatment affects only cells in the tumor and the area close to it; systemic treatment affects cells throughout the body. The local treatment may be surgery and/or radiation therapy to the breast and underarm. The systemic treatment may be chemotherapy (anticancer drugs), hormonal therapy (drugs that interfere with the effects of the female hormone estrogen), or both. Systemic treatment is generally given before surgery and/or radiation therapy. In some cases, local treatment may be followed by additional systemic treatment with hormonal therapy, chemotherapy, or both. Some women also may have biological therapy (which stimulates the immune system to fight the cancer).

Researchers continue to study the effectiveness of biological therapy, new chemotherapy and hormonal therapy, and new combinations of chemotherapy and hormonal therapy. Information about ongoing clinical trials (research studies) is available from the Cancer Information Service (see below), or from the clinical trials page of the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) Cancer.gov Web site at http://cancer.gov/clinical_trials on the Internet.

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Sources of National Cancer Institute Information

Cancer Information Service

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers): 1-800-332-8615

NCI Online

Internet

Use <http://cancer.gov> to reach the NCI's Web site.

LiveHelp

Cancer Information Specialists offer online assistance through the *LiveHelp* link on the NCI's Web site.

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