

Metastatic Breast Cancer Facts

(compiled by: MBC Alliance)

1. **What is Metastatic Breast Cancer (MBC)?** MBC also known as Stage IV is cancer that has spread outside of the breast to other organs such as bones, liver, lung or brain. This process is called metastasis.
2. **What happens when breast cancer spreads?**
Breast cancer that spreads to another organ, such as bones, lung, or liver, is still breast cancer and does not become bone cancer or liver cancer or lung cancer. Under a microscope, the tumor cells will still look and act like breast cancer and will be treated as breast cancer.
3. **Who gets MBC?** No one brings metastatic disease on themselves. The sad truth is that anyone who has had an earlier stage of breast cancer can experience a metastatic recurrence and some women have metastatic disease on their initial diagnosis of cancer—despite mammograms and early detection!
4. **Why does breast cancer metastasize?** Researchers at this time can't explain why metastatic disease occurs, but they're working on finding answers. Early detection is a detection tool, but it does not cure or prevent an early cancer from coming back in the future as metastatic disease.
5. **What are the statistics on incidence of MBC?** There are estimates that 20-30% of patients with an early stage cancer will have their cancer return as metastatic, even if they were told their early stage cancer had been "cured." Another 8% of new breast cancer cases are found to be metastatic at their initial diagnosis.
6. **What is the main difference between early stage breast cancer and MBC?** MBC is treatable but no longer curable. Treatment is lifelong and focuses on preventing further spread of the disease and managing symptoms. The goal is for patients to live a good quality of life for as long as possible.
7. **How is MBC treated?** Depending primarily on the kind or subtype of MBC, patients may be on either targeted therapies or systemic chemotherapy. Radiation and surgery are also sometimes used.
8. **What are the different kinds (subtypes) of MBC?** Subtypes for early stage and MBC are the same: An estimated 65% of patients have Hormonal (estrogen or progesterone driven), also called ER+/PR+; 20% have Her2+(fueled by a protein identified as Her2 neu) and 15% have Triple Negative Breast Cancer (TNBC- which does not have any of the 3 above known biomarkers: ER, PR or HER2). These numbers are approximate, because some people have more than one subtype (HER2+ and ER+) or their subtype may change over time.
9. **How many women and men die of breast cancer each year?** Approximately 40,000 die of breast cancer each year—a number that essentially is unchanged over the last 20 years. All deaths from breast cancer are caused by MBC.
10. **How many people are living with MBC in the US?** Although the National Cancer Institute collects statistics of patients who have an initial diagnosis of MBC, the NCI does not count MBC recurrences. Studies estimate that there are over 155,000 women and men living with metastatic breast cancer in the US—and doing our best to live well!

11. **Is MBC a chronic disease?** Not yet, but that is an important goal. As researchers identify more and better treatments, MBC could become a chronic disease like diabetes or HIV/AIDS, where patients can be stable on medications for 20 or more years.
12. **How much is spent on research funding for MBC?** Several years ago, the MBC Alliance did a study that found that of all research grants, funded by major public and private sources from 2006-2013, only 7% of funds studied MBC, even though metastasis is what causes breast cancer to become a deadly disease.
13. **What is National Metastatic Breast Cancer Awareness Day?** October 13 was sent aside by unanimous House and Senate resolutions in 2009, establishing that one day in October should recognize and bring awareness to metastatic breast cancer. One day is not enough but it's a start for year round awareness of what mbc is and why it's important for all of us.
14. **Do men get breast cancer?** Yes, men do get breast cancer and they are often misdiagnosed initially. They represent about 1% of the new cases of breast cancer and 1% of the deaths from metastatic breast cancer. (410 deaths in 2012)
15. **Do young women get MBC?** YES. For young women under 40: 5% of the new cases of breast cancer and 3% of the deaths. Metastatic breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in this age group. For young women under 50: 27% of the new cases of breast cancer and 16% of the deaths.
16. **How is MBC monitored?** Usually MBC is monitored by periodic imaging tests (CT, PET or bone scans or MRIs), blood tests measuring tumor markers and assessment of how the patient is feeling.
17. **How often are patients living with MBC scanned?**
Usually we are scanned every 3 months; if metastases remain stable or shrink, scans may be done less frequently (eg every 6 months).
18. **What is scanxiety?** Scanxiety refers to patient anxiety over scans and occurs as their scan date approaches. Good test results refer to stable disease (mets are not growing or spreading) or NED (no evidence of disease) on scans.
19. **What is NED (no evidence of disease) and how does it differ from being 'in remission' or being 'cancer free'?** No Evidence of Disease means that the metastases are no longer detectable on an imaging scan. This is great news, but because breast cancer cells are still circulating in the body, treatment continues. 'In remission' is an older term and not usually used in metastatic breast cancer. Once you are metastatic, you are never 'cancer-free,' but being NED or being stable are still wonderful words to hear from your oncologist.