

The truth about triple-negative breast cancer

An Educational Resource for Patients With Triple-Negative Disease

A lot of doctors will tell you that one of the biggest challenges they face in treating triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC) is overcoming the hopelessness that many patients feel upon hearing the diagnosis. There's a lot of bad information about TNBC floating around out there. If you've done a little reading about it already, you may be feeling overwhelmed and scared. Take heart, and let us break down some of the most common myths for you.



True or False? There are no good treatments for TNBC.

FALSE! There ARE good treatments for TNBC—it's just that two of the most common treatments for most types of breast cancer don't work for TNBC patients.

To be more specific, TNBC cannot be treated with the medications known as tamoxifen, aromatase inhibitors, or trastuzumab. The reason for this is because TNBC does not have the targets known as estrogen receptor, progesterone receptor, and human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (Her2) needed for these drugs to work. It is the lack of these targets that lead to the name "triple-negative."

However, all of the other available therapies for breast cancer—surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy—can do a good job of treating TNBC. In fact, a lot of research has found that the early response to chemotherapy is often better in patients with TNBC than in patients with other types of breast cancer.

The largest of these studies looked at more than 1,000 patients who received presurgical chemother-

apy for breast cancer. After treatment, 22% of the patients with TNBC did not have signs of cancer at the original tumor site and surrounding lymph nodes (researchers call this a complete response), while only 11% of patients with other types of breast cancer had the same positive results.

Among patients who had a complete response, survival rates were similar between those with TNBC and those with other types of breast cancer.

Still, this study aside, it is important to know that TNBC is an area of lots of research, and there is a lot of work being done to discover more treatment options.

True or False? TNBC is more likely to relapse than other breast cancers and more likely to be fatal.

Yes, this is true—but only up to a point. Many cases of TNBC are actually low risk. This risk is estimated based on tumor size, involvement of the lymph nodes in the armpit, and other factors that help your doctor determine the chance of recurrence.

In the study mentioned earlier, recurrence (when cancer comes back) and death rates were higher for TNBC patients—**but only in the first 3 years after diagnosis and first treatment.** The researchers even suggested that the risk of recurrence and death may have been higher for non-TNBC patients in years 4 to 6. This means that, 3 years after diagnosis, those patients who were successfully treated for TNBC had similar—or better—outcomes than patients with other types of breast cancer.



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In another large study of more than 1,500 women with breast cancer, the likelihood of recurrence and death because of breast cancer was higher for TNBC patients in the 5 years after diagnosis and treatment, but not later. The risk of recurrence for TNBC patients fell rapidly after 4 years, and no recurrences were found after 8 years. This suggests that women with TNBC who are disease free 8 years after diagnosis and treatment have a relatively low risk of recurrence.

True or False? You are a person, not a statistic.

TRUE! Studies such as the ones described above can help predict average outcomes among large groups of patients, but *they can't tell us what the future holds for YOU or any other individual patient.*

TNBC can be described as generally more aggressive than other types of breast cancers. But factors such as the size of the tumor, its growth rate, and whether cancer has spread to the lymph nodes

under your arm are more important in predicting how you might do; the type of breast cancer you have is less important. Your doctor will look at these and a number of other factors, and together you will come up with the treatment plan that makes the most sense for you.

Additional Resources

There's a lot of bad information out there about TNBC. If you're looking for a good online resource for additional information, try one of these sites first:

- Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation (www.tnbcfoundation.org/index.html)
- American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org/cancer/breastcancer/index)



DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS RELATED TO OTHER COMMON ASPECTS OF TRIPLE-NEGATIVE BREAST CANCER?

Additional **free** patient education fact sheets are available on the following topics:

- Chemotherapy side effects
- Treatment options
- Wig selection and care
- Diet and exercise during chemotherapy

Ask your doctor about these additional resources today!

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