



Understanding Cancer Staging

Cancer staging describes how much cancer is present and where it is located in the body. Your cancer team determines the stage using information from imaging, biopsies, surgery, laboratory tests, and other testing.

Many cancers use the **TNM system**:

T = Tumor

Describes the size of the original tumor and/or how far it has grown into nearby tissues.

N = Nodes

Describes whether cancer has reached nearby (regional) lymph nodes.

M = Metastasis

Describes whether cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.

In general, a lower stage means the cancer is more limited to where it started, while a higher stage means it has grown more extensively or spread farther. However, stage is only one part of understanding cancer. Tumor biology, biomarkers, pathology results, overall health, and many other factors may affect treatment recommendations.

Breast Cancer Staging

Breast cancer staging considers the tumor in the breast, nearby lymph nodes, and whether cancer has spread elsewhere.

Stage 0: Noninvasive Breast Cancer

- The abnormal cancer cells have not invaded surrounding breast tissue.
- This includes **ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS)**.
- You may hear this described as a very early or noninvasive breast cancer.

Stage I: Early Breast Cancer

The invasive breast cancer is generally small and has little or no involvement of nearby lymph nodes.

- **Stage IA:**
 - The tumor is 2 centimeters (about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch) or smaller and there is no regional lymph node involvement.
- **Stage IB:**
 - There may be no detectable breast tumor or a tumor 2 centimeters or smaller, with only a very small amount of cancer (micrometastasis) found in nearby lymph nodes.

Stage II: Early to Locally Advanced Breast Cancer

This breast cancer may involve a larger tumor and/or a limited number of nearby lymph nodes.

- **Stage IIA:**
 - This may include a tumor that has reached nearby lymph nodes or a tumor between 2 and 5 centimeters without lymph node involvement.
- **Stage IIB:**
 - This may include a tumor between 2 and 5 centimeters with nearby lymph node involvement, or a tumor larger than 5 centimeters without regional lymph node involvement.

Stage III: Locally Advanced Breast Cancer

The cancer has not spread to distant organs, but it has more extensive involvement of the breast, nearby tissues, and/or regional lymph nodes.

- **Stage IIIA:**
 - There may be more extensive lymph node involvement and/or a larger breast tumor.
- **Stage IIIB:**
 - The tumor has grown into the chest wall and/or skin of the breast. Inflammatory breast cancer is also classified within this T4 category.
- **Stage IIIC:**

- Cancer has reached more extensive regional lymph nodes, such as lymph nodes above or below the collarbone and/or certain combinations of lymph nodes under the arm and inside the chest.

Stage IV: Metastatic Breast Cancer

The cancer has spread beyond the breast and regional lymph nodes to a distant part of the body. Common sites can include the bones, liver, lungs, or brain. Stage IV is also called metastatic breast cancer.

Important Note About Breast Cancer Staging

Breast cancer staging is more complex than tumor size alone. In the United States, prognostic staging can also incorporate information about the cancer's biology. This can include factors such as hormone receptor status, HER2 status, tumor grade, and other appropriate testing.

Because of this, two people with breast tumors of similar size may not necessarily have the same prognostic stage.

Educational Disclaimer

This information is intended for general education and should not replace individualized medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment recommendations from your treating healthcare team. Cancer staging can be complex and may change as additional imaging, pathology, surgical, or laboratory information becomes available.

Source: National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology and American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) staging systems. Guideline versions current as of September 2026.