

What To Know About Inflammatory Breast Cancer

The World Health Organization reports that roughly 2.4 million new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year. That makes breast cancer the most common cancer in women across the globe.

There are various types of breast cancer, and some are more common than others. Inflammatory breast cancer diagnoses are rare, but the condition still merits the attention of those seeking to learn as much as possible about the disease.

What is inflammatory breast cancer?

The National Breast Cancer Foundation, Inc.® notes that inflammatory breast cancer (IBC) occurs when cancer cells infiltrate the skin and lymph vessels of the breast. According to Breastcancer.org, IBC often begins in the milk ducts, which are the tubes that carry milk from the lobules to the nipple. While that means

IBC is an invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC), Breastcancer.org reports inflammatory breast cancer signs and symptoms are very different from other types of IDC.

What is different about IBC?

Many forms of breast cancer are characterized by the development of a lump in or near the breast that's often the first sign of the disease. However, the NBCF notes that this is not typical of IBC. IBC cells block lymph channels in the skin, which can make the breast appear red, swollen and inflamed.

What are additional signs of IBC?

A feeling of thickness or heaviness in the breast or visible swelling are common early signs of IBC, according to Breastcancer.org. The NBCF notes symptoms begin to appear when the lymph vessels of the breast become blocked

by cancer cells. Symptoms may include:

- Areas of skin discoloration that are pink, red, or purple. A discolored area typically covers more than one-third of the breast.
- A persistent rash that looks like an insect bite or a bruise.
- Swelling or firmness that typically affects one breast.
- Itching, pain, and/or burning in the breast. These symptoms are persistent, and one breast may feel warmer than the other.
- Skin may appear pitted like an orange peel.
- Changes in the nipple, including inversion, which occurs when a nipple turns inward. A nipple also may flatten or dimple.
- Lymph nodes near the collarbone or under arm become swollen.

The suddenness of IBC

The NBCF notes that the

rash associated with IBC may appear suddenly. Women may go to sleep at night without a rash but then awake in the morning with a breast that looks red, pink, purple, or discolored. Some rashes will not go away, while some women experience a rash that comes and goes over time. But the rapid onset of symptoms is a hallmark of IBC, according to Breastcancer.org.

What causes IBC?

The cause of IBC remains a mystery and doctors are unsure if there are any unique risk factors for it.

How common is IBC and who gets it?

The National Cancer Institute estimates that between 1 and 5 percent of all breast cancers are IBC. While age is often cited as a risk factor for breast cancer, IBC differs somewhat from other forms of the disease in that it is most common among women younger



than 40. IBC also is more common among Black women and women who are overweight. But researchers remain uncertain why IBC tends to affect these groups more than others.

IBC is rare, but knowledge of the disease can help women recognize symptoms earlier, which can improve prognosis. More information about IBC is available at breastcancer.org

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