

# Secondary Breast Cancer Matepukupuku ā-Ū Tuarua



This information sheet is for people who have a diagnosis of secondary breast cancer. It will help you to understand what secondary breast cancer is and the physical and emotional impacts it can have.

Mō ngā tāngata kua puta te whakataurua mō te pā ō te matepukupuku ā-ū tuarua, tēnei pukapuka, ko te nuinga ō rātou, he wāhine. E whai ana te pukapuka ki te āwhina i a koe, kia tino mārama ai koe ki tēnei mea, te matepukupuku ā-ū, me ōna papātanga ā-tinana, ā-ngākau hoki ki a koe me te hunga tata ki a koe.

## Understanding secondary breast cancer

When breast cancer spreads, for example to the bones, it is called secondary breast cancer.

The most common parts of the body that breast cancer spreads to are the bones, the liver and the lungs. It can also spread to the brain, although this is less common. A diagnosis of secondary breast cancer means that the cancer cannot be cured, but often it can be controlled.



*“I got a little scared by the tests: it was a shock. I don’t remember what was said but my husband did. He had all the questions.”*

**Beth**

## Secondary breast cancer treatment

Secondary breast cancer may respond to several types of treatment: hormone therapy, radiation treatment, chemotherapy, and targeted treatments. The treatment suggested for you will depend on your type of secondary breast cancer, the parts of your body the cancer is affecting, and your wishes.

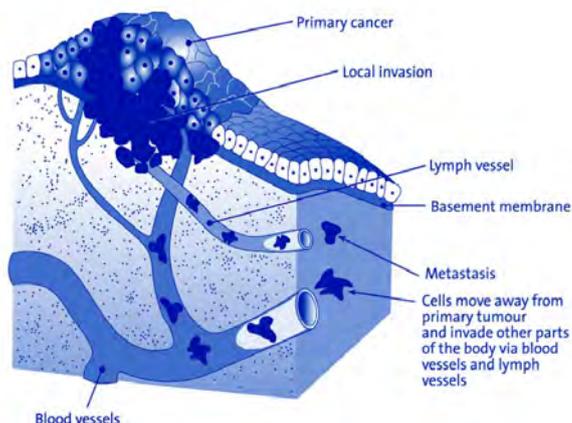
### Hormone therapies

Many breast cancer cells contain proteins known as oestrogen receptors and progesterone receptors. A cancer that contains a certain number of these cells is described as hormone-receptor positive.

Hormone-receptor-positive breast cancers may be treated by hormones, whereas hormone-receptor-negative breast cancers do not respond to hormone therapy and are treated with chemotherapy. Tamoxifen is one of the most commonly used hormone treatments.

### Targeted treatments

Targeted treatments attach to the proteins on, or in, cancer cells to interfere with signals that tell the cancer cells to grow. Targeted treatments include monoclonal antibodies. These are medications that target specific proteins on the surface of the cells and trigger the body’s immune system to attack the cancer cells.



## Diagnosing secondary breast cancer

Every person’s experience of secondary breast cancer is different. Tests can be used to identify whether cancer has spread and where it has spread to.

Your symptoms will depend on the part of your body affected by secondary breast cancer, and you may not have many symptoms. You may experience symptoms in the bone, liver, lungs or the brain.

If you feel you have had a change in your health and you are worried about it, discuss your concerns with your GP. Diagnostic tests can include: bone scans, ultrasound and CT scans, chest X-ray, MRI and PET scans.

Examples of targeted treatments used in breast cancer are the monoclonal antibodies trastuzumab (Herceptin) and pertuzumab (Perjeta). They are only beneficial to people who have 'HER2-positive' breast cancer.

### Radiation treatment

Radiation treatment is usually recommended to: relieve bone pain and prevent and treat spinal cord compression, fractures after bone surgery and fractures without surgery. It is also used to treat regional recurrence on the skin, in the lymph nodes, and cancer in the brain.



### Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is usually recommended when your cancer is not hormone sensitive, hormone treatments are no longer controlling cancer growth or symptoms and/or breast cancer is progressing.

Before any treatment begins, make sure you have discussed the choices with your cancer treatment team. Ask for a second opinion if you want one.

### Controlling the symptoms and side effects of secondary breast cancer

It is common to experience some side effects during treatment. The best way to control the symptoms of secondary breast cancer is to treat the cancer itself. Pain, fatigue and nausea are some of the symptoms of secondary breast cancer. Morphine is a commonly used medication for severe pain. Radiation treatment can also be used.

### Bone-strengthening medication

If you have secondary breast cancer affecting your bones, you may be offered bone-strengthening medication such as bisphosphonates.

### Spinal cord compression

Secondary breast cancer in the vertebrae is quite common. For a small number of people, the spread of cancer to the spine causes pressure on the spinal cord, causing pain and, in extreme cases, damage to the spinal cord.

Report any of the following symptoms to your cancer treatment team as soon as they occur:

- tingling or numbness in arm, hand or leg
- difficulty walking
- trouble passing urine
- constipation or diarrhoea.

Early treatment—usually steroid medications, radiation treatment, surgery or a combination of these, offers the best chance of avoiding permanent damage to the spinal cord.

### Breathing problems

One of the common causes of breathing problems in people with secondary breast cancer is a pleural effusion (a build-up of fluid around a lung). Always seek medical attention if breathing becomes difficult.

### Hypercalcaemia

Hypercalcaemia (high levels of calcium in the blood) can occur when you have secondary breast cancer in your bones. It is treated in hospital with medications to help reduce the levels of calcium in your blood, and any symptoms you may have been experiencing will resolve as your blood levels return to normal.

### Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is swelling in an area of the body due to the lymph vessels being blocked. In people with breast cancer, the arm and chest wall on the side of treatment may be affected. The best treatment for lymphoedema is a programme of exercise, massage and skin care, and a properly fitted compression sleeve or bandaging.

**If you develop a fever (if your temperature is 38 degrees Celsius or over) or you feel unwell even with a normal temperature—take action quickly. Contact your cancer treatment team and follow the advice given.**

## Living with secondary breast cancer

*“You know when I was told, I didn’t feel angry. I didn’t have the energy to waste being angry. I thought, I’ve got to fight this.”*  
Colleen

When you hear the news that your breast cancer has spread, you may experience a mixture of emotions.

No matter how you are feeling, support services are available to you. If you speak to your GP they can refer you to someone such as a counsellor or psychologist who can help you work through feelings of loss and grief.

Feelings can range from disbelief and denial to shock, anger, numbness and helplessness. There are a number of ways that secondary breast cancer may affect you and your relationships.



There are many practical ways that you can be supported when you have cancer. Eating a balanced diet, exercise and relaxing are an important part of learning to live with secondary breast cancer.

Traditional healing, complementary or alternative healing are some ways to help you to feel better and cope more easily with your cancer treatment.

In some regions the Cancer Society offers a therapeutic massage service to support people’s physical and emotional wellbeing while they are undergoing cancer treatment.

**Cancer Society** or **Sweet Louise** support groups can offer you the opportunity to share your experiences and learn different ways of coping. **Look Good Feel Better** offer free classes for any person having cancer treatment

## Suggested reading and websites

Read the booklet *Secondary Breast Cancer- Matepukupuku ā-Ū Tuarua* at [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz).

Other information is available on managing cancer fatigue, lymphoedema, radiation treatment and more, from the Cancer Society website.

*100 Questions and Answers about Advanced and Metastatic Breast Cancer*. Lillie D (2011). Shockney, Gary R. Shapiro.

*Armed with Chocolate Frogs: Living with advanced breast cancer* (2006). Edited by Debbie Fry. Kate Carey Productions.

*When Cancer Returns: Support for people with cancer* (2012). National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, U S

*The Cancer That Wouldn’t Go Away: A story for kids about metastatic cancer* (2013) Hadassa Field (Recommended for four- to eight-year-olds)

**Cancer Australia** <http://canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/breastcancer/living-breast-cancer/issues-women-whose-breast-cancer-hasspread>

**Breast Cancer Care (UK)**  
[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/information-support/secondarymetastatic-breast-cancer](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/information-support/secondarymetastatic-breast-cancer)

**Macmillan Cancer Support (UK)**  
[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/breast-cancersecondary/understanding-cancer](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/breast-cancersecondary/understanding-cancer)

**Sweet Louise (New Zealand)** [www.sweetlouise.co.nz](http://www.sweetlouise.co.nz)

**Skylight (New Zealand)** Skylight helps children and young people to deal with change, loss and grief  
[www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

**Breast Cancer Aotearoa Coalition (New Zealand)**  
[www.breastcancer.org.nz/Support/Secondary](http://www.breastcancer.org.nz/Support/Secondary)

**For more information or support call our Cancer Information Helpline 0800 CANCER (226 237) to speak with our specialist information staff or visit your local Cancer Society office.**