

Triple negative breast cancer

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1. What is triple negative breast cancer?

Triple negative breast cancer is the name given to breast cancer that is:

- oestrogen receptor negative (ER-)
- progesterone receptor negative (PR-)
- HER2 negative

Oestrogen and progesterone receptors

Some breast cancers are stimulated by the hormone oestrogen. This means that oestrogen in the body helps the cancer to grow. This type of breast cancer is called oestrogen receptor positive (ER+).

Invasive breast cancers are tested to see if they are ER+ using tissue from a biopsy or after surgery. Tests will also be done to see if your breast cancer is progesterone receptor positive (PR+). Progesterone is another hormone.

If breast cancer doesn't have oestrogen receptors, it's called oestrogen receptor negative (ER -). If it doesn't have progesterone receptors, it's called progesterone receptor negative (PR -).

Find out more about [hormone receptors and breast cancer](#).

HER2

Some breast cancer cells have a higher than normal level of a protein called [HER2](#) on their surface, which stimulates them to grow.

Invasive breast cancers are tested for HER2 levels using tissue from a biopsy or surgery. If breast cancer cells have a normal level of HER2 on their surface, they're known as HER2 negative (HER2-).

If your cancer doesn't have oestrogen and progesterone receptors and is HER2 negative, you have triple negative breast cancer.

2. How common is triple negative breast cancer?

Around one in five people with invasive breast cancer have triple negative breast cancer.

Triple negative breast cancer is more common in:

- women who have inherited an altered [BRCA gene](#) (particularly BRCA1)
- black women
- women who have not yet reached the menopause
- women under 40

Some types of breast cancer are more likely to be triple negative than others. These include [medullary](#) and [metaplastic](#) breast cancer. However, most people with triple negative breast cancer have [invasive ductal breast cancer](#) as this is the most common type of breast cancer in general.

3. Prognosis (outlook)

Research has shown that the risk of triple negative breast cancer coming back or spreading is higher than some types of breast cancer in the first few years. However, after around five years the risks are similar to, and may be lower than, other types of breast cancer. Find out more about coping with [worries about breast cancer coming back](#).

4. Genetic testing

Women with triple negative breast cancer are more likely to have an altered [BRCA1 gene](#) than women with oestrogen receptor positive breast cancer.

Women who are under the age of 50 when they are diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer should be offered a referral to a specialist family history clinic or a regional genetics clinic to discuss [genetic testing](#), regardless of their family history of breast cancer.

Women who are over the age of 50 may also be referred to a specialist genetics clinic to discuss genetic testing. If this is appropriate in your situation, your treatment team will discuss this with you.

5. Treating triple negative breast cancer

Triple negative breast cancer can be treated with a combination of

- [chemotherapy](#).
- [surgery](#).
- [radiotherapy](#).
- [bisphosphonates](#)

Research has shown chemotherapy generally has a larger benefit for triple negative breast cancer compared to oestrogen receptor positive breast cancer. Chemotherapy for triple negative breast cancer is often given before surgery. The drugs used are likely to include [carboplatin](#) or [cisplatin](#).

Some breast cancer treatments, such as hormone (endocrine) therapy and HER2 targeted therapies are of no benefit to people with triple negative breast cancer.

6. Clinical trials

[Clinical trials](#) are trying to find out if different treatments will be helpful in treating triple negative breast cancer. [Cancer Research UK](#) has a list of current trials for triple negative breast cancer. You can also ask your treatment team about any trials that may be suitable for you.

7. Further support

Being diagnosed with breast cancer can make you feel lonely and isolated.

Many people find it helps to talk to someone who has been through the same experience as them. Breast Cancer Now's [Someone Like Me](#) service can put you in touch with someone who has had a diagnosis of triple negative breast cancer, so you can talk through your worries and share experiences.

We have an online [Forum](#) where you can post messages and receive support.

If you would like any further information and support about breast cancer or just want to talk things through, you can speak to one of our experts by calling our free [Helpline](#) on 0808 800 6000.

Last reviewed: February 2019

Next planned review begins 2021
