

Getting Quality Care

You should get the same care whether you live in a city, small-town, or in a rural area. But studies have shown that where you live does affect the quality of your care. For example, people living in cities often get different care from those living in rural areas.

There are breast cancer treatment guidelines based on medical evidence. These guidelines say what treatments are most likely to help breast cancer patients. Most doctors agree about most of the guidelines. The guidelines make up a standard of care for breast cancer. We recommend guidelines from three groups

- 1) The National Cancer Institute (NCI) www.nci.nih.gov.
- 2) The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) www.nccn.com.
- 3) The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association (BCBS) www.bcbs.com.

If your doctor did not tell you about clinical trials, you are not alone. A recent study found that only 38 percent of patients are offered a clinical trial by their doctors. Studies show that breast cancer patients who take part in clinical trials tend to do better than patients who do not. This may be because most patients are given good care and follow-up in a clinical trial. They get good care no matter which treatment they get. Ask your doctor about clinical trials.

Try to get care somewhere that treats a lot of women each year for breast cancer.

Studies have shown the following:

- 1) Breast cancer patients tend to get better care at larger hospitals;
- 2) Breast cancer patients do better with surgeons who see more than 30-50 new cases each year (ask your doctor's office how many breast cancer patients they treat each year).
- 3) Patients treated by breast cancer specialists tend to do better than patients whose surgeons are not breast cancer specialists.

It is important to see an experienced doctor who has done what you need many times. For reconstructive surgery, your plastic surgeon should offer you "before and after" photos. That way you can see what to expect from the surgery.

Ask about tele-medicine. With access to the Internet and the Iowa Communications Network, both doctors and patients can get up-to-date information on how to treat breast cancer. Now doctors across the country can consult each other over the phone and Internet. Ask your doctors if they consult with cancer specialists. If your doctor does not want to, maybe you should find one who will.

To find out where the more than 50 National Cancer Institute (NCI) designated cancer centers are located, use NCI's website www.nci.nih.gov.