What Is HER2-Positive Breast Cancer?

**What Is HER2?**

HER2 (short for human epidermal growth factor receptor 2) is a gene (a section of DNA) found in all of the body's cells. Genes contain instructions that cells use to make proteins, which do many jobs in the body.

The HER2 gene has the instructions for making the HER2 protein. This protein sits on the surface of cells, and its job is to help cells grow.

Some cells have too many copies of the HER2 gene, and so they make too much of the HER2 protein. The extra HER2 protein causes these cells to grow faster than other cells.

Breast cancer cells with too much HER2 protein are called HER2-positive, and this type of breast cancer often grows and spreads more quickly than some other types. About 1 of every 5 breast cancers is HER2-positive.
How Does My Doctor Know If My Cancer Is HER2-Positive?

The sample of breast tissue removed during your biopsy is studied in a laboratory to help diagnose your cancer. One of the tests performed is a HER2 test, which looks at cells under a microscope to see if they have too much of the HER2 gene or the HER2 protein.

If the cells do, then your cancer is called HER2-positive on the report that the laboratory sends to your doctor. If they don’t, then your cancer is called HER2-negative. Sometimes the test result is “borderline,” and the laboratory may retest the cells. The HER2 status of your cancer is just one part of the report, called a pathology report, that your doctor receives. Your doctor may request several other tests, and the results of these will also be on the pathology report.

How Does HER2 Status Affect My Treatment?

Medicines made just for HER2-positive breast cancer are available. These medicines, called targeted treatments, work in a different way than conventional chemotherapy drugs. Their goal is to block the HER2 protein’s ability to make cells grow. Targeted treatments can affect both cancer cells and normal cells. They are often given together with conventional chemotherapy.

The choice of which targeted treatment to use depends on how advanced your cancer is, the timing of your treatment, and other medical factors unique to you. You should talk with your doctor about your options.

For More Information

In addition to talking with your health care team, you can visit the following websites to find more information on HER2-positive breast cancer:

- Living Beyond Breast Cancer: www.lbbc.org/learn/types-breast-cancer/her2-positive-breast-cancer
- Breastcancer.org: www.breastcancer.org/symptoms/diagnosis/her2
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org/cancer/breastcancer

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References:


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