

Q: “My mother has been diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer. How does this cancer differ from others cancers of the breast?”

A: Breast cancers do come in different forms. Inflammatory breast cancer (IBC) is a rare, fast-growing type of breast cancer. Unlike other breast cancers, this one may or may not cause a lump in the breast. The more subtle changes of IBC can make it more difficult to detect through breast exams and mammograms.

In IBC, the cancer cells often form sheets, known as cancer nests. These nests block the lymph vessels that normally keep lymph fluid flowing in the skin of the breast. When the lymph fluid is blocked, the breast can become swollen, red and feverish. The swelling can also cause dimpling in the skin.

Symptoms of IBC can include:

- Swelling, redness and warmth in the breast
- Breast tenderness or pain
- Itching in or on the breast
- A change in the nipple, sometimes pulling the nipple back into the breast
- A change in the breast skin, especially thickening and pitting, ridges or small bumps that look like a rash or hives
- Discoloration that looks like bruising
- Swollen lymph nodes under the arm
- One or more lumps in the breast

IBC can be mistaken for other problems such as allergic reaction, an insect bite or mastitis (an infection of the breast). Problems of the breast that do not respond to antibiotics or allergy medications may indicate a more serious problem and should be examined again by a doctor.

Because IBC grows and spreads quickly, it is important to diagnose it as early as possible so that treatment can begin. A combination of chemotherapy, surgery and radiation are often necessary to beat this cancer.

Dr. Michelle Fenoughty is an OB/GYN at Westside Physicians for Women, part of the Hendricks Regional Health Medical Group. To schedule an appointment call 272-8033.