After finding out you have breast cancer, you may feel shocked, upset, anxious or confused. These are normal responses. Talk about your treatment options with your doctor, family and friends. Seek as much information as you need. It is up to you how involved you want to be in decisions about your treatment.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Australian women (after non-melanoma skin cancer), affecting over 13,000 women each year. Although rare, breast cancer can also affect men.

Early breast cancer can be treated successfully and for most women breast cancer will not come back after treatment.

How is breast cancer treated?
The type of treatment you are offered will depend on your situation and the type of breast cancer you have. Although nearly all treatments have side-effects, most can be effectively managed. Ask your doctor what side-effects to expect and how best to manage them.

Breast conserving surgery removes the breast cancer and a small area of healthy tissue around it. This procedure can also be called a lumpectomy, wide local excision or complete local excision. Breast conserving surgery plus radiation therapy is as effective as mastectomy for most women diagnosed with early breast cancer.

A mastectomy is the surgical removal of the whole breast affected by cancer. If you are considering breast reconstruction discuss this with your doctor before your surgery.

In most cases breast surgery also involves the removal of one or more lymph nodes in the armpit, to test whether the breast cancer cells have spread.

Radiation therapy uses X-rays to destroy cancer cells that may be left in your breast or breast tissue after surgery. You may experience some pain or discomfort after each treatment, although the treatment itself is painless. It is usually given over a five to six week period. Radiation therapy can also be used to reduce the size of the cancer and to relieve pain or other symptoms.

Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs to help destroy cancer cells that may have spread to other areas of your body but cannot be detected. It may be used in addition to surgery and radiation therapy. Some chemotherapy drugs come in tablet form, others are injected through a vein in the arm or hand to reduce the chance of the cancer coming back.

Hormone treatment may be used if there are hormone receptors on your cancer cells. Hormonal therapy can help destroy remaining breast cancer cells or cancer cells that may have spread to other areas of your body but cannot be detected. It may be used in addition to surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

What about my physical and emotional wellness?
Eating a healthy diet including a variety of foods will ensure you have what your body needs to cope with treatment and recovery. Regular physical activity can improve your recovery and reduce side-effects such as fatigue.

• Don’t be afraid to ask for professional and emotional support.
• Consider joining a cancer support group.
• Learn to ignore unwanted advice and ‘horror stories’.
• Live day-to-day and remember that every day is likely to be different.

Complementary therapies can work alongside medical treatments and some have been shown to improve quality of life or reduce pain. There is no evidence that these therapies can cure or prevent cancer. Some have not been tested for side-effects, may work against other medical treatments and may be expensive. Talk with your doctor about using complementary therapies. If you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?
Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20
Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Australia website
www.cancer.org.au

Cancer Australia
www.canceraustralia.gov.au

Breast Cancer Network Australia 1800 500 258
www.bcna.org.au

Cancer Council acknowledges the National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre’s contribution to this fact sheet.