

Prison Withheld Cancer Diagnosis and Care From Inmate, Lawsuit Claims

A woman alleges Mississippi prison officials denied her tests and treatment, allowing her breast cancer to spread without her knowledge.

February 21, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Mississippi prison officials not only failed to inform an inmate that she had breast cancer but also denied timely medical care, allowing the cancer to [spread to](#) Stage IV. She recently filed a lawsuit against the health care providers at the prison, according to [Law & Crime](#).

Susan Balfour, 62, alleges that medical officials at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility withheld her breast cancer diagnosis from her until days before she was release after serving 33 years. When she saw specialists outside the prison, she learned that the breast cancer had progressed to Stage IV.

The [lawsuit](#) also claims that Balfour and other inmates were forced to mix raw cleaning chemicals without protective equipment in order to clean the facility.

“My cancer is now untreatable because of what they did to me, and I’m standing up to prevent this from happening to others inside—many of whom are my friends,” said Balfour in a statement. “Even when we are locked up and stripped of our rights, we should still have the right to know what is happening inside our bodies.”

It is estimated that more than 168,000 women in the United States were living with metastatic breast cancer in 2020, according to [Susan G. Komen for the Cure](#). Although metastatic breast cancer cannot be cured, it can be treated to extend and maintain quality of life. About one third of women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer live at least five years after diagnosis.

In 2011, as an inmate at the Mississippi Department of Corrections serving time for manslaughter in the death of a police officer, Balfour said she felt pain in her breasts and was diagnosed with “benign-appearing ... microcalcifications in both breasts,” according to [The Guardian](#).

Over the next several years, she underwent irregularly scheduled follow-ups and mammograms, but despite the appearance of masses, she didn’t receive a biopsy until November 2021 her the time of her release. Prison staff told her she had Stage II breast cancer. After receiving a second opinion from an outside specialist, she learned that the cancer was Stage IV and had metastasized

to her lymph nodes and bones.

“Ms. Balfour’s cancer could have been treated more effectively had the defendants taken her repeated requests for medical care seriously,” the lawsuit said. “She faces a much worse prognosis from which she is unlikely to recover.”

The lawsuit seeks compensatory and punitive damages for several violations of Balfour’s civil rights as well as her right under the Eight Amendment not to be subjected to cruel and unusual punishment. George Hollowell, one of Balfour’s attorneys, said prison medical providers violated their oath to do no harm, according to Law & Crime.

Balfour’s lawyers allege that there are at least 15 other incarcerated individuals at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility who have cancer and are not receiving proper treatment.

“I feel betrayed by our system that failed to provide timely medical care for me. I feel hopeless, I feel angry, I feel bitterness. I feel shock and disbelief of this going on with me at a time when I’m getting ready to get out [of prison],” Balfour said [in an interview](#). “It is too much to take in, that this is happening to me.”

To read more, click [#Metastatic Breast Cancer](#) or Cancer Health’s [Basics on Breast Cancer](#). It reads in part:

Who gets breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer among women, after skin cancer. Nearly 300,000 women are diagnosed with invasive cancer annually, according to the American Cancer Society. Men can also develop breast cancer, but this is rare. People with [BRCA mutations](#) are at high risk for breast cancer.

Around a quarter of women with early breast cancer will go on to develop metastatic disease. About 15% of breast cancer patients have hard-to-treat triple-negative breast cancer , which is more common among young women and Black women.

What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

The most common sign of breast cancer is a lump or mass. A hard and painless mass is most likely to be malignant, but cancerous tumors can sometimes be tender, soft or painful. Other symptoms may include breast swelling, skin irritation or dimpling, breast or nipple pain, nipple retraction (turning inward), redness, scaliness or thickening of the nipples or skin of the breast and discharge from the nipple.

How is breast cancer diagnosed?

Regular screening for breast cancer can detect the disease early, when it is easier to treat. Professional guidelines vary in how often they recommend screening. [The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force now recommends](#) that women at average risk should start screening at age 40. All women and men who notice a new mass, lump or other changes in their breasts should report this to their health care provider.

If a mammogram detects changes in the breasts, an ultrasound may be done for further examination. Once diagnosed with breast cancer, MRI scans are usually done to assess the size of the tumor, look for additional tumors and determine whether the cancer has spread beyond the breasts.

A breast biopsy, or examination of a tissue sample, may be done to determine whether a tumor is malignant. [Genomic testing](#) of a tumor sample provides more information about the type of cancer and how best to treat it.