All nurses who care for patients with cancer should recognize the importance of the differences between ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) and early invasive breast cancer (EIBC). Most female patients with cancer hear only one word after being given a diagnosis: cancer. The nurses who care for these patients are the ones who help them understand their diagnosis. Whether the diagnosis is DCIS or EIBC, the severity and the perceived risk of recurrence or dying from the diseases needs to be addressed.

Prior to 1980, before the widespread use of screening mammography, DCIS was a rare diagnosis. DCIS accounted for 2%–5% of all newly diagnosed breast cancers (Cady & Chung, 2011). With the increased use of screening mammography, 40% of all breast cancers diagnosed by mammography are DCIS. DCIS is the fourth most common cancer diagnosed in women, and almost 60,000 new cases are diagnosed annually in the United States (Cady & Chung, 2011).

DCIS accounts for 20% of all newly diagnosed breast cancers (Cady & Chung, 2011). It often appears without warning in asymptomatic women, having been detected on routine screening mammography. The treatment of DCIS is basically the same as stage I EIBC, which includes a segmental mastectomy followed by radiation therapy (with or without tamoxifen if patients are sensitive to estrogen or progesterone) and, in the case of multifocal DCIS, with a mastectomy (Liu et al., 2010).

The general consensus is that pure DCIS has no metastatic potential. In addition, the cause-specific survival of DCIS, regardless of the type of therapy, is 96%–98%. It has been suggested that calling neoplastic cells that do not invade or metastasize carcinoma is an anomaly. Instead, it has been suggested that the term DCIS be replaced with ductal intraepithelial neoplasia (Veronesi, Zurrida, Goldhirsch, Rotmensz, & Viale, 2009).

EIBC is cancer that has spread from where it began, usually from the lobules (milk glands) or milk ducts. This occurs when cancer evolves from inside of the ducts or lobules and spreads into surrounding breast tissue. A difference between DCIS and EIBC is that, with DCIS, the cancer will grow inside the ducts; with EIBC, the cancer will have invaded surrounding breast tissue.