



FACTSHEET



a programme of
irish cancer society

information on **drug therapy**

Femara (letrozole)

This factsheet explains briefly what Femara is, how it works, when it may be prescribed, what the benefits are and what side effects may occur. Femara is the brand name of the drug that is used throughout this factsheet. Most people know it by this name, although its generic (general) name is letrozole.

WHAT IS FEMARA?

Femara is a drug used to treat breast cancer in post-menopausal women (women who have gone through the menopause/change of life). It is a type of hormone treatment known as an aromatase inhibitor.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The female hormone oestrogen is involved in the stimulation of some breast cancers. This means that in these types of tumours oestrogen encourages the cancer cells to grow. When a woman has been through the menopause, oestrogen is produced in body tissues such as fatty tissue and the tumour

itself. This happens because other hormones (androgens) are converted into oestrogen by an enzyme known as aromatase. Femara works by stopping the conversion of androgens into oestrogen and so reducing the amount of oestrogen circulating around the body.

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WHEN IS FEMARA PRESCRIBED?

Femara can be prescribed for post menopausal women with primary breast cancer (cancer which started in the breast and has not spread to other parts of the body). Femara prescribed in this way is also called adjuvant therapy. Femara may be prescribed as a further treatment after five years of Tamoxifen. This is known as extended adjuvant therapy. In this case Femara treatment should begin within three months of completing Tamoxifen therapy.

Femara will only be prescribed if your breast cancer is thought to rely on oestrogen to grow (oestrogen receptor-positive tumours).

Femara may be prescribed if your breast cancer comes back or progresses while you are taking tamoxifen or other hormone treatments.

In some situations it may be prescribed for primary breast cancer to reduce the size of the tumour before surgery. This is called neo-adjuvant treatment.

HOW IS FEMARA TAKEN?

Femara comes as a tablet (2.5mg) that you take once a day. It is best to take it at the same time every day. If you miss a dose you don't need to take an extra dose the next day as the level of drug in your body will remain high from the previous day. It is important not

to stop taking Femara without talking to your specialist first. If the drug causes Nausea, or stomach upset, it may be taken with food and/or at bedtime.

HOW LONG WILL I HAVE TO TAKE FEMARA?

This will vary from person to person. Your specialist will discuss with you how long you need to carry on taking Femara. You will usually continue to take the drug for as long as your breast cancer remains under control. If your breast cancer does progress while you are taking Femara, there are other treatments that may be effective.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF FEMARA?

Everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people may experience more side effects than others. Usually Femara causes only a few side effects that can be kept under control. It is rare for someone to stop taking Femara because of the side effects.

The known side effects of Femara are listed below. It is important to remember that you may not get any of these.

More common side effects

These include symptoms such as aching or pain in the muscles and joints, loss of appetite or nausea. These symptoms tend to be mild and temporary. If

your symptoms don't improve talk to your specialist, as there are other ways of controlling side effects.

You may have menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats and vaginal dryness. You can do practical things to help yourself such as wearing cotton clothing and reducing your intake of caffeine and alcohol. Some people find complementary therapies helpful. For further information see Action Breast Cancer's factsheet on **Understanding and Managing Menopausal Symptoms** and **Complementary Therapies**.

You may also suffer from nausea or vomiting which can be helped by taking your tablet with food.

Less common side effects

These include side effects such as tiredness, headaches and shortness of breath. They are usually temporary, but you should tell your specialist if you experience any of these.

Some women notice that their hair becomes thinner while taking Femara, although it is not usually noticeable to other people.

Aromatase inhibitors may cause osteoporosis (bone weakening) when administered for a prolonged period.

As a result of this your specialist may wish to check your bone density (strength and thickness)



with a scan before taking Femara and during the treatment. To maintain bone health you can increase your intake of calcium and vitamin D. You may also be prescribed a calcium and vitamin D supplement. Stopping smoking and regular weight bearing exercise will also help to keep bones strong.

Other less common side effects include perspiration, constipation and feeling in a low mood. Weight gain may also occur in some women.

CAN I TAKE FEMARA WITH MY OTHER DRUGS?

It is not advisable to take other drugs containing oestrogen, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT), while you are taking Femara. There do not seem to be any other drugs that interfere with Femara and other medicines are not affected if you are taking Femara.

FURTHER SUPPORT

If you have any concerns about taking Femara you can talk to your specialist or breast care nurse.

You might find it easier to share your feelings with someone who has had a similar experience to you.

Reach to Recovery is a programme set up to help and support women who have recently had a breast cancer diagnosis. The programme works on the principle of personal contact between the patient and a Reach to Recovery volunteer – a woman who has had treatment for breast cancer. Carefully selected and fully trained volunteers are available to provide advice and reassurance at a time when a woman is most in need of both.

For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline Freefone on 1800 30 90 40.

HELP FROM ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, provides breast cancer information and support, and funds breast cancer research. Our services are free, confidential and accessible.

For more information call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on Freefone 1800 30 90 40 or visit **www.cancer.ie/action**



OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer

43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4.
National Breast Cancer
Helpline Freefone:
1800 30 90 40
Email: abc@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society

43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4.
Freefone Helpline:
1800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

Voluntary Health Insurance Board

VHI House
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1.
Callsave: 1850 44 44 44
Email: info@vhi.ie
Website: www.vhi.ie

Quinn Healthcare

Mill House
Fermoy
Co. Cork.
LoCall: 1890 70 08 90
Email:
info@quinn-healthcare.com
Website: www.quinn-
healthcare.com.ie

Hibernian Health

PO Box 764
Freepost
Togher
Co. Cork
Phone: 1850 71 66 66
Email: support@
hibernianhealthinsurance.ie
Website: www.hibernian.ie

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society

www.cancer.ie

Breast Cancer Care UK

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Cancerbackup

www.cancerbackup.org

The Susan G. Komen Foundation

www.komen.org

Europa Donna

www.europadonnaireland.com

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland

www.mldireland.com

Lymphoedema Ireland

www.lymphireland.ie

ABC – ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

- **National Breast Cancer Helpline** 1800 30 90 40 – staffed by specialist cancer nurses.
- **Patient care programmes** – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer.
- **Health Promotion** – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle.
- **Advocacy** – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland.
- **Professional support** – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients.
- **Research** – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work or make a donation please contact us.

action
breast
cancer

a programme of
irish cancer society

Freefone Helpline
1800 30 90 40

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