Arimidex (anastrozole)

This factsheet explains what Arimidex is, how it works, when it might be prescribed, what the benefits are, and what side-effects may occur. For more information, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

What is Arimidex?

Arimidex is a drug used to treat breast cancer in postmenopausal women (women who no longer have their periods). This type of hormone treatment is called an aromatase inhibitor.

How does Arimidex work?

Many breast cancers are encouraged to grow by the female sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone. These breast cancers are called hormone sensitive or hormone receptor positive and Arimidex blocks the effects of these hormones. With less oestrogen getting to the cancer cells they grow more slowly or stop growing altogether.

If you have had the menopause (stopped having periods) you no longer make oestrogen in your ovaries. Instead it is made in small amounts by turning other sex hormones called androgens into oestrogen. Androgens are made in your adrenal glands, which are small glands above your kidneys. Aromatase is the enzyme which changes androgens into oestrogen and aromatase inhibitors stop this happening. This change happens mostly in fatty tissue, muscle and your skin.
**When is Arimidex prescribed?**

Arimidex will only be prescribed if your breast cancer grows with the help of oestrogen. This is called oestrogen receptor positive. It is only suitable if you have been through the menopause. Arimidex is not usually prescribed if you have osteoporosis (thinning and weakening of the bones) because of the risk of further damage to your bones.

**Early breast cancer**

Arimidex may be used to treat women with early breast cancer (cancer that has not spread) after their surgery. This is called adjuvant therapy. It may also be given after 2–3 years of Tamoxifen as studies have shown that switching may be better for some women. It is also used if you are unable to take Tamoxifen because of the possible risk of side-effects.

**Advanced breast cancer**

Arimidex may also be prescribed if you develop local recurrence (cancer which comes back in the breast) or secondary breast cancer (cancer which has spread to other parts of your body) while you are still taking Tamoxifen or other anti-oestrogen hormones. In this situation you will usually continue to take Arimidex for as long as your breast cancer remains under control. If your breast cancer does progress while you are taking Arimidex, there are other hormone treatments that may be effective.

**How is Arimidex taken?**

Arimidex comes as a tablet (1 mg) 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. The level of the drug in your body will remain high from the previous day. It is important not to stop taking Arimidex without talking to your specialist first. Store Arimidex tablets out of reach of children, at room temperature, away from heat, light and moisture.

**How long will I have to take Arimidex?**

If you have early breast cancer, you will usually take Arimidex for 5 years. Sometimes you may be switched to Arimidex after 2–3 years of taking Tamoxifen, finishing up after a total of 5 years.

**What are the possible side-effects of Arimidex?**

Everyone reacts differently to drugs. Some people experience more side-effects than others. Arimidex usually causes only a few side-effects that can be kept under control. The known side-effects of Arimidex are listed below. It is important to remember that you may not get any of these.

Arimidex has lactose in it but the amount is very small. It may, rarely, cause some stomach upset if you are lactose intolerant.

**Common side-effects:**

- Joint discomfort pain or stiffness in your joints can occur when taking Arimidex. It is usually fairly mild and can sometimes be relieved by gentle exercise or mild painkillers. However, in some rare cases it may be severe enough for your specialist to advise you to stop treatment.

- Menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats are common but tend to be mild and usually improve after a short while. 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 example reflexology. Another menopausal symptom you may notice is vaginal dryness. Vaginal moisturisers or lubricants can be helpful and are available without prescription from your pharmacy. For further information see our factsheets Understanding and Managing Menopausal Symptoms and our booklet Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies.

helpline@irishcancer.ie
• Fatigue and tiredness may also be a problem for some women, and you may find you need more rest than usual. For a copy of our booklet *Coping with Fatigue,* call the National Breast Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700

• There is some risk of osteoporosis. As Arimidex works by reducing the amount of oestrogen in your body, over a long time this can cause osteoporosis (thinning of the bone). Your specialist usually checks the density (strength and thickness) of your bones with a Dexa scan before you start taking Arimidex. You may not be given Arimidex if you already have osteoporosis because of the risk of further damage to your bones.

You may find that your hair gets slightly thinner while you are taking Arimidex. This is not usually noticeable and will grow back when you stop taking it.

**Rare side-effects**

Vaginal bleeding is a rare side-effect of Arimidex. This can happen in the first few weeks after starting the treatment. It can occur when changing from one hormone tablet to another. If bleeding continues, you need to tell your cancer specialist or specialist nurse. Do not stop taking your Arimidex without consulting your specialist.

**Can I take Arimidex with other drugs?**

Drugs containing oestrogen, such as the contraceptive pill or HRT, should not be taken while you are taking Arimidex because they stop it working effectively. Make sure to tell your doctor about any other medicines you are taking, including vitamins or non-prescription items such as herbal remedies. Some herbal items containing phyto-oestrogens (plant oestrogens) may not be safe.

**Further support**

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

You might also find it easier to share your feelings with someone who has had a similar experience to you. For example, Reach to Recovery is a programme set up to help and support women who have recently had a breast cancer diagnosis. The programme involves personal contact between you 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 you are most in need of both.

For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call the National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700.
Useful Organisations

American Cancer Society
Website: www.cancer.org

Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute
Website: www.indi.ie

Irish Osteoporosis Society
Website: www.osteoporosis.ie

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on Arimidex or for confidential advice from our cancer specialists, call the National Cancer Helpline Freefone

1800 200 700
(Monday–Thursday, 9am–7pm; Friday, 9am–5pm)
or email helpline@irishcancer.ie

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