

Tamoxifen

This factsheet explains briefly what Tamoxifen is, how it works, when it may be prescribed, what the benefits are and what side effects may occur.

WHAT IS TAMOXIFEN?

Tamoxifen is a drug commonly used as part of the treatment for some breast cancers. It belongs to a group of drugs known as hormone therapies and is also described as an anti-oestrogen drug.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Hormones are substances that occur naturally in the body and control the growth and

activity of normal cells. The female hormones oestrogen and progesterone can affect the growth of breast cancer cells.

Some breast cancers are stimulated by the hormone oestrogen, which encourages cells to grow. These cancers are known as oestrogen receptor positive tumours. Tamoxifen works by blocking the effects of oestrogen on cancer cells, so stopping them from growing. This is why it is called an anti-oestrogen.

HOW DO I KNOW IF TAMOXIFEN WILL WORK FOR ME?

Your cancer specialist doctor will order a test on your tumour, either after a biopsy or after surgery, to find out if Tamoxifen will be of benefit to you. This test is called an oestrogen receptor test. If you are oestrogen receptor positive, this means your tumour has oestrogen receptors and you could benefit from Tamoxifen.



HOW MUCH TAMOXIFEN DO I TAKE AND WHEN DO I TAKE IT?

Tamoxifen is available as a tablet and a liquid. The recommended dose is 20mg once a day. It is best taken at the same time each day, the time of day does not matter. Taking it with food can help avoid feelings of Nausea.

DOES IT MATTER IF I MISS A DOSE?

As Tamoxifen can take several weeks to reach a steady level in the blood, this level does not dramatically change over a short period. Missing a single dose will not do any harm, but in the long term, it is better to take it regularly.

HOW LONG WILL I HAVE TO TAKE TAMOXIFEN?

You will usually be advised to take Tamoxifen for five years. Your Doctor may also suggest switching to another anti-oestrogen medication after 3 years. This can give extra benefits.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TAKING TAMOXIFEN?

Taking Tamoxifen significantly reduces the risk of the cancer coming back and improves overall survival in all age groups. The benefits are greater where the tumour is oestrogen receptor positive.

In women who have been through the menopause, Tamoxifen treatment slightly reduces bone loss. However, in younger women, Tamoxifen may not have this benefit. Therefore, younger women will need to discuss risks of osteoporosis (bone thinning) and possible scanning for this with their doctor. Eating a calcium-rich diet and getting some weightbearing exercise such as walking may also be important. You may also be started on Calcium and Vitamin D supplements.

There is also some evidence that Tamoxifen reduces cholesterol and may therefore reduce the risk of heart disease.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF TAMOXIFEN?

Like any drug, Tamoxifen can have side effects. However, everyone reacts differently to drugs. Some people have more side effects than others, and some people have no side effects at all. Some side effects are mentioned below, but if you experience any new symptoms, it is important to discuss them with your GP, specialist or breast care nurse. In general, the benefits of taking Tamoxifen far outweigh the risks in women who are oestrogen receptor positive.

The most common side effects are similar to menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness or discharge, irregular periods,

lighter periods or stoppage of periods. These symptoms are more common in women taking Tamoxifen before the menopause than after. For women experiencing menopausal symptoms, please see Action Breast Cancer's **Understanding and Managing Menopausal Symptoms**.

Other possible side effects include headaches, vaginal irritation or discharge and leg cramps at night. A small number of women notice an increase in downy facial hair, changes to their singing voice, and thinning of the hair.

Some women may have indigestion or mild nausea, although these symptoms usually improve with time.

Many women find that they put on weight during their treatment, although there is no clear evidence linking this weight gain to Tamoxifen.

Tamoxifen can also affect the lining of the womb (endometrium), which may become thickened. In a very few cases it may cause polyps or ovarian cysts or, very rarely, cancer of the womb. If you have any unexpected vaginal bleeding or pain tell your GP or specialist.

Some studies have shown a slightly higher increase in blood clotting in women taking Tamoxifen.



There is a very slight increased risk in changes in vision in women taking Tamoxifen. The risk is greater in women who have problems such as cataracts before they start to take Tamoxifen.

A very rare side effect of Tamoxifen is hair loss.

CAN I TAKE OTHER DRUGS WHILE I AM TAKING TAMOXIFEN?

It is not advisable to take anti-coagulants (drugs that thin the blood) such as Warfarin while you are on Tamoxifen. Always check with your specialist if you are concerned about taking any other medicines.

I AM STILL HAVING REGULAR PERIODS (PRE-MENOPAUSAL). WILL TAMOXIFEN WORK FOR ME?

Tamoxifen is effective for both pre- and post-menopausal women, particularly those whose breast cancer cells are oestrogen receptor positive.

FERTILITY AND PREGNANCY

If you are pre-menopausal, your periods may become irregular or stop. They may return once you stop taking Tamoxifen. Even if your periods stop while taking Tamoxifen, you could still become pregnant. You should not become pregnant while taking Tamoxifen as the risks to the foetus are unknown. It is important therefore, to use reliable non-hormonal contraception such as condoms, femidoms, a diaphragm or coil (IUD).

If you wish to become pregnant after Tamoxifen treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor. It may be advisable to wait a couple of months after stopping the drug.

CAN TAMOXIFEN PREVENT BREAST CANCER?

Trials involving women at high risk of getting breast cancer have been undertaken internationally. This was done by giving women either Tamoxifen or a placebo (dummy pill) for 5 years. Initial results have shown a 49% reduction in breast cancer risk over a five year period, compared with the group taking the placebo. The longer term results of these trials are awaited. There are also ongoing trials involving women living in Ireland.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I STOP TAKING TAMOXIFEN?

Many women feel insecure when they are told by their doctor that they should stop taking Tamoxifen after 5 years or so. This is natural and it may help to discuss your concerns with your GP, specialist doctor or breast care nurse specialist. In general, the side effects of Tamoxifen may outweigh the benefits after the recommended time of taking the drug.

FURTHER SUPPORT

If you have any concerns about taking Tamoxifen you can talk to your specialist, chemotherapy nurse 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 Freephone 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

OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer

43/45 Northumberland Road
Ballsbridge, Dublin 4.

Freefone: 1800 30 90 40

Email: abc@irishcancer.ie

Web: www.cancer.ie/action

Irish Cancer Society

43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4.

Freefone Helpline:

1 800 200 700

Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

Reach to Recovery

43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4.

Freefone Helpline:

1800 30 90 40

Quinn Healthcare

Mill House, Fermoy, Co. Cork.

LoCall: 1890 89 1890

Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Saturday 10 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.

Web: www.quinn-healthcare.com

Hibernian Aviva Health

Postal Address

PO Box 764, Togher, Co. Cork

Head Office

One Park Place, Hatch Street,
Dublin 2

CallSave: 1850 717 717

Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Website: www.hibernian.ie

VHI Healthcare

(All correspondence should be sent to the postal address in Kilkenny)

IDA Business Park

Dublin Road, Kilkenny

Callsave: 1850 44 44 44

Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Saturday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Website: www.vhi.ie

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society

www.cancer.ie

Breast Cancer Care UK

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

American Cancer Society

www.cancer.org

The Susan G. Komen Foundation

www.komen.org

Europa Donna

www.europadonnaireland.com

Lymphodema Ireland

www.lymphireland.com

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland

www.mldireland.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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