

Endocrine therapy for breast cancer

This leaflet gives general advice and outlines possible side effects for individuals having endocrine therapy – hormone tablets, including Tamoxifen and Aromatase Inhibitors (AIs), such as Anastrozole, Letrozole and Exemestane.

You will be advised as to the total duration of your endocrine treatment, either 5 years or up to 10 years if indicated.

Advice for:

- **Pre-menopausal** women taking 5 years of Tamoxifen
- **Post-menopausal** women taking Tamoxifen or an AI (5 or 10 years)
- **Men** taking Tamoxifen

These individuals do not need any additional blood tests or oncology appointments for the duration of this treatment.

Tamoxifen is the recommended treatment in pre-menopausal women requiring 5 years of treatment, and also for male patients.

Aromatase inhibitors are the recommended treatment for post-menopausal women.

However, AIs have an associated risk of osteopenia / osteoporosis (low bone density), which is associated with a higher risk of bone fractures.

Those at risk of osteoporosis should:

- Take regular weight-bearing exercise e.g. walking.
- Follow a healthy-eating plan which includes foods high in calcium and Vitamin D, consider a daily supplement containing 10 mcg of Vit D.
- Avoid poor lifestyle choices such as smoking and high alcohol consumption.

Please see the leaflet entitled 'Advice following your breast cancer treatment' for further information regarding assessment of your bone density.

Please report any episodes of post-menopausal bleeding to the Breast Oncology team **as soon as possible**.

Side effects of endocrine therapy

Below are some of the most common side-effects of endocrine therapy, and some options to consider if you are struggling with such side-effects. It may help you to know that research has shown that patients who experience hot flushes and musculoskeletal pain in fact have a

very good outcome from this treatment, so it is worth persevering with the endocrine therapy if possible.

Hot flushes

If you are bothered by hot flushes, it may be worth trying the following options:

- Asking your GP / pharmacist to try rotating brands of endocrine therapy.
- Acupuncture – via self-referral to My Cancer My Choices.
- SSRIs – A drug commonly used for treatment of depression, which has been shown to also reduce the severity and frequency of hot flushes. This requires a prescription from your GP.

Muscle / joint (musculoskeletal) pains

Options include:

- Rotating brands of endocrine therapy.
- Analgesia (NSAIDs), such as Ibuprofen.
- Exercise.
- Acupuncture – via self-referral to My Cancer My Choices.

Vaginal dryness

All patients receiving endocrine therapy for a 'hormone positive' breast cancer should ideally avoid all treatments containing hormones, including HRT tablets / patches, oestrogen pessaries / creams (eg Vagifem).

Non-hormonal lubricants should be tried in the first instance, or your GP may consider prescribing lignocaine (anaesthetic) gel if the lubricant is unhelpful.

If symptoms remain intolerable, then oestrogen pessaries / creams *may* be considered for a limited time period, after discussion with your GP.

If you are taking Tamoxifen, the amount of oestrogen absorbed from the lubricants is low, and hormone-containing lubricants may therefore be considered if other measures fail.

If you are taking an AI, hormone-containing lubricants are not recommended due to the level of hormone absorption, but may be considered for a short period only. If long-term use of such lubricants is required, then a change from AI to Tamoxifen could be considered.

Hair thinning

This can occur with both Tamoxifen and AIs, but is more common with AIs. You may wish to try topical (foam or liquid) Minoxidil. If you are taking an AI, you may wish to consider switching to Tamoxifen and can contact us on 0118 322 7420 or BreastCareNurses@royalberkshire.nhs.uk to discuss further.

Contact us

- Breast Cancer Clinical Nurse Specialists 0118 322 7420, or email BreastCareNurses@royalberkshire.nhs.uk
- <https://mycancermychoices.org/book-a-treatment/> or telephone 01344 662906

More information

If you have any questions about your endocrine treatment or this information, please speak to your oncology doctor or breast cancer nurse.

For more information about the Trust visit our website www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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