

Here's your detailed guide on anastrozole



Anastrozole

Anastrozole (also called Arimidex) is a hormone therapy drug, that lowers the oestrogen level in the body. It belongs to a group of drugs called aromatase inhibitors (AIs).

Anastrozole is used to treat oestrogen receptor (ER+) positive breast cancer in both premenopausal women and postmenopausal women. It can also be taken by men who have oestrogen receptor (ER+) positive breast cancer, however, tamoxifen is more commonly used.

What are the possible side effects of anastrozole?

Like all medications, anastrozole can cause side effects. However, it is important to know that everyone reacts differently to medicines. Some people will have more side effects than others. Most side effects can be managed and often improve within months of starting as your body gets used to the new medication.

If the side effects of anastrozole continue to cause you distress and interfere with your quality of life and day to day functioning, your specialist team or GP may suggest changing to another aromatase inhibitor (AI) such as letrozole or exemestane, as some people get on better with a different hormone therapy drug.

Common side effects of anastrozole

Menopausal symptoms such as:

Muscle or joint pain

Muscle or joint pain can be a common side effect of taking anastrozole.

Hot flushes

Hot flushes are a common side effect of taking an aromatase inhibitor (AI) such as anastrozole. They can vary in their intensity and frequency (from feeling warm to experiencing intense heat on the upper body and face).

Night sweats and sleep disturbance

In addition to hot flushes, night sweats can also be a common side effect of taking anastrozole impacting on sleep, mood and concentration.

Need advice?

Talk to a myHT Guide nurse on 0800 69 42 48
or myHTGuideNurse@bcf.org.nz

You can also contact your breast care team or GP.

Headaches

Taking anastrozole may cause headaches.

TIP

If you experience headaches, tell your specialist team, GP, or community pharmacist, they can give you advice about pain relief (analgesia) that may help.

IMPORTANT

If your headaches don't improve, or they get worse, tell your specialist team or GP.

Mood changes and depression

It's not uncommon for people to feel low or depressed when diagnosed with, and treated, for breast cancer. Dealing with hormone therapy (HT) can be challenging, the side effects and menopausal symptoms experienced can also impact your mental and emotional health (such as mood, confidence and self-esteem).

IMPORTANT

If you need support to work through any of the emotional effects that you experience talk to your GP, specialist team or BCFNZ nurse specialist about how to get help. There are different types of support, these can include connecting with others who are going through similar experiences, counselling, and medication that can help treat low mood and depression.

Fatigue (extreme feeling of tiredness)

Persistent tiredness (fatigue) that doesn't go away with rest or sleep is a common menopausal symptom and side effect of anastrozole.

Nausea (feeling sick) / indigestion

Feeling sick (usually mild) can be a side effect for some people taking anastrozole.

TIP

Taking anastrozole with food or taking it at night can help.

Vaginal irritation such as dryness and itching

Vaginal irritation can include dryness and itching, this may be a mild irritation or can be severe, causing pain, and inhibiting intercourse/sexual function.

Decreased libido (decreased sex desire)

Decreased libido (decreased sexual desire) is a common side effect of taking hormone therapy. Decreased libido is strongly related to physical and vaginal changes (e.g. vaginal dryness and painful intercourse – dyspareunia) and psychosocial effects such as changes in body image and self-esteem.

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Other common side effects of anastrozole

Osteoporosis (thinning of the bone)

Anastrozole reduces the amount of oestrogen in the body, and over time can increase the risk of bone thinning. Thinning of the bone – also called osteoporosis - can lead to bones becoming weaker and makes them more susceptible to breaking (fracture).

Before or not long after starting hormone therapy (HT), your specialist team will sometimes check the strength and thickness (density) of your bone with a bone density scan (DEXA scan). If your scan shows osteoporosis, your specialist team will usually prescribe the following:

- Bisphosphonates (drugs that strengthen bones and reduce the risk of bones breaking).
- Calcium and vitamin D supplements.

Vaginal discharge

Some women can experience vaginal bleeding in the first few weeks after starting anastrozole. It most commonly occurs when changing from one hormone therapy to another.

IMPORTANT

If the bleeding continues for more than a few days tell your specialist team or GP.

Skin rash

Taking anastrozole may cause a rash, which may become itchy or dry. Speak to your community pharmacist, GP, or specialist team, they can tell you what the best products are to use on your skin to help.

TIP

If your skin feels dry, try using soap-free cleansers and unperfumed moisturising cream.

Other side effects of anastrozole

Loss of appetite and changes to your taste

Taking anastrozole can affect your appetite and can cause changes to your taste (some foods may taste different causing a bitter or a metallic taste in your mouth).

TIP

Rather than attempt to eat three big meals a day, try to eat small, frequent meals or snacks. Try different foods to find out what tastes best to you.

Carpal tunnel syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) is pressure on a nerve in your wrist. This can cause pain, tingling and numbness in your arm, hand or fingers.

If you have these symptoms, tell your specialist team, GP or community pharmacist.

Change to hair or facial hair

Some women will experience hair thinning or some hair loss when taking anastrozole and a small number of women will notice an increase in downy facial hair.

Effects on the liver

Sometimes, when taking anastrozole, it can cause changes to your liver.

These changes are usually mild and unlikely to affect how your liver works. Your specialist team or GP will request blood tests to check how well your liver is working.

Effects on cholesterol

Taking anastrozole can sometimes cause the level of cholesterol in the blood to rise.

This does not usually require treatment, however, if you have a history of high cholesterol you may want to discuss it with your specialist team or GP.

Other side effects of anastrozole

Increased risk of blood clots

Breast cancer and taking treatment such as hormone therapy can increase the risk of blood clots in your leg such as deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or a pulmonary embolism (PE) in your lung.

IMPORTANT

Blood clots can be harmful. If you have any of the following symptoms get medical help immediately:

- **Signs of a blood clot in your leg:** pain, redness, heat and swelling in your calf, leg or thigh.
- **Signs of a blood clot in your lung:** sudden shortness of breath, tightness in your chest, an unexplained cough or coughing up blood.

Travel

Tell your specialist team, GP or community pharmacist if you're planning long-distance plane, car or train travel.

Long periods of sitting can increase your risk of blood clots. You may need to wear compression stockings (firm-fitting stockings that apply pressure to help blood flow). These can be fitted by your community pharmacist.

Taking other medicines with anastrozole

Anastrozole can interfere with some medicines, herbal supplements and rongoā Māori, making it less effective.

It is always important to check with your specialist team, GP, or community pharmacist.

Contraception

It is important to use contraception to prevent a pregnancy (anastrozole may harm a developing baby). Speak to your specialist team, GP or community pharmacist they will be able to provide advice:

- What types of contraception to use (such as barrier contraception).
- How long after hormone (endocrine) therapy you should continue to use contraception for.