

Here's your detailed guide on letrozole



Letrozole (Femara)

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

Letrozole 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 letrozole?

Like all medications, letrozole 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 letrozole 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 anastrozole or exemestane, as some people get on better with a different hormone therapy drug.

Common side effects of letrozole

Menopausal symptoms such as:

Muscle or joint pain

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

Hot flushes

Hot flushes can be a common side effect of taking letrozole. They can vary in their intensity and frequency (from feeling warm to experiencing intense heat on the upper body and face).

Heart palpitations (fast heart rate)

Heart palpitations (racing heart, heart skipping and tightness) can be experienced by some people when taking letrozole.

IMPORTANT

Speak to your specialist team, GP or BCFNZ nurse specialist if you have any of these symptoms.

Night sweats and sleep disturbance

Night sweats can also be a common side effect of taking letrozole impacting on sleep, mood and concentration.

Headaches

Taking letrozole 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 letrozole.

Weight gain

Taking letrozole may increase your appetite causing weight gain.

Need advice?

Talk to a myHT Guide nurse on 0800 226 8773
or myHTGuideNurse@bcf.org.nz

You can also contact your breast care team or GP.

Nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting

Feeling sick (nausea) and vomiting can be a side effect for some people taking letrozole. These symptoms usually subside or become easier to manage over time.

TIP

Taking letrozole with food or after food can help.

Diarrhoea or constipation

Taking letrozole may cause diarrhoea (passing more stools (poo) than normal for you). Letrozole may also cause constipation (not being able to pass stools (poo) as often as you normally do).

TIP

If you have diarrhoea, it's important to drink plenty of fluids. Your GP or specialist team may also prescribe medication to help with diarrhoea.

To avoid constipation, it's important to keep active and eat a high-fibre diet.

Fluid retention / oedema (fluid build-up)

Swelling can also occur in the ankles, feet and lower legs. Swelling usually improves over time.

TIP

To help manage mild to moderate fluid retention:

- Avoid salty or processed foods that can contribute to fluid retention.
- Elevate the head whilst sleeping to help with eye swelling.
- Elevate the swollen area
- Avoid sitting and standing for long periods of time.

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) and psychosocial effects such as changes in body image and self-esteem.

Other common side effects of letrozole

Osteoporosis (thinning of the bone)

Letrozole 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.

High blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol

In some people letrozole can cause high blood pressure (hypertension). It may also cause the level of cholesterol in the blood to rise.

Your GP will be able to monitor and treat if necessary.

Vaginal discharge

Some women can experience vaginal bleeding in the first few weeks after starting letrozole. 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 letrozole 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 letrozole

Risk of infection

Taking letrozole can reduce the number of white blood cells in your blood.

White blood cells help to fight infection. If you have an infection such as a temperature over 37.5C, feeling shaky, a cough, a sore throat, and / or needing to pass urine (pee) more frequently make an appointment to see your GP.

Eye problems

Although this is not a common side effect, for some people, taking letrozole it can cause eye problems, such as dryness, irritation and blurry vision.

IMPORTANT

If you experience any eye problems speak to your specialist team or GP, they will be able to recommend a number of strategies to help manage your symptoms and will also advise when it may be necessary to see an eye specialist (ophthalmologist).

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.

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.

Changes to your taste

Taking letrozole may cause changes to your taste (some foods may taste different causing a bitter or a metallic taste in your mouth).

TIP

Try different foods to find out what tastes best to you.

Other important information when taking letrozole

Increased risk of blood clots

Taking letrozole 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 letrozole

Letrozole 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 (letrozole 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.