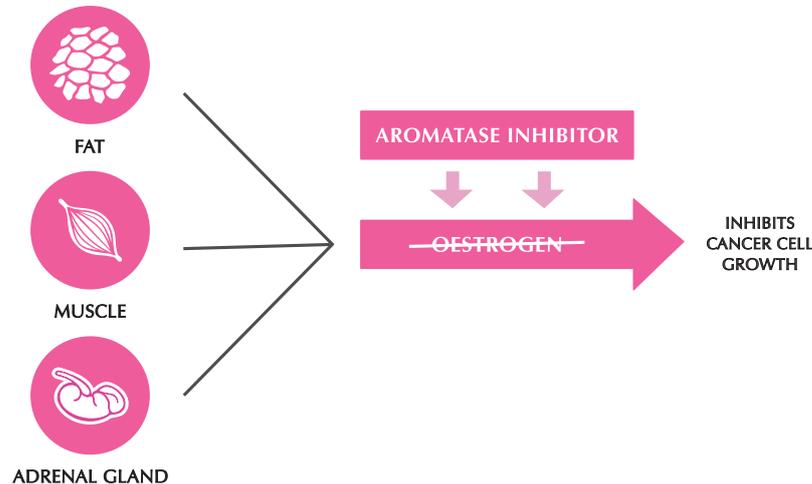


# Aromatase Inhibitors

anastrozole, letrozole, exemestane

## What are aromatase inhibitors and how do they work?

Some breast cancers require oestrogen to grow and these cancers are known as 'oestrogen receptor positive' (ER+). Oestrogen attaches to receptors in breast cancer cells, enabling the cancer cells to grow and multiply. After the menopause the ovaries no longer produce oestrogen but it continues to be made at low levels in fat and other tissues. This happens when an enzyme called aromatase changes other hormones into oestrogen through a complex process. Aromatase inhibitors are a class of drugs that block this process and reduce the amount of oestrogen in the body.



## Why do I need to take an aromatase inhibitor?

- Because your breast cancer is ER+.
- Because aromatase inhibitors reduce the risk of death from breast cancer, lower breast cancer recurrence rates and reduce the risk of developing a new cancer in the other breast.

Aromatase inhibitors can also be used to control cancer that has spread to other parts of the body (secondary or metastatic breast cancer) and occasionally they are used when surgery is not appropriate.

Aromatase inhibitors are mostly given to post-menopausal women whose ovaries no longer produce oestrogen. However, some pre-menopausal women who are at high risk of recurrence may be prescribed an aromatase inhibitor along with an injection (Zoladex) which stops the ovaries producing oestrogen.

## How long will I have to take an aromatase inhibitor?

- You will usually take an aromatase inhibitor for 5 -10 years.
- Some post-menopausal women may switch to an aromatase inhibitor after taking tamoxifen for 2- 5 years.
- In metastatic breast cancer, the time you take an aromatase inhibitor will vary.

## How do I take an aromatase inhibitor?

- Aromatase inhibitors are tablets taken daily by mouth, at a similar time each day.

- If you miss a dose, you should not take an extra tablet the next day.
- If you are not taking an aromatase inhibitor every day or decide to stop, please contact your nurse specialist or doctor as this will affect the success of your treatment.
- It is important to contact your GP to get a new prescription every three months.

## Can I take an aromatase inhibitor with other drugs?

Aromatase inhibitors can interact with other medications and with some herbal medicines or supplements. Please discuss your other medications with your nurse specialist or doctor.

Always tell any other doctor, dentist or pharmacist who is treating you that you are taking an aromatase inhibitor.

## What are the possible side effects of an aromatase inhibitor?

As aromatase inhibitors reduce the amount of oestrogen in the body, it is possible to experience both physical and emotional side effects. These symptoms are usually not severe, however for some people they can be distressing and disruptive to daily life.

Everyone reacts differently to drugs so side effects will vary from person to person. It is unlikely that an individual would experience all of the side effects listed here. Your nurse specialist or doctor will help you to manage these symptoms and will advise you on strategies to minimise them.

# Aromatase Inhibitors continued

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## Common side effects

### Joint and muscle pain/stiffness

This is a very common side effect. These symptoms may improve after the first few months but for many people the discomfort persists. Being physically active and maintaining a healthy weight can help to reduce joint and muscle pain and keep your joints flexible. Mild pain killers, such as paracetamol may also help.

### Hot flushes and sweats

Hot flushes can occur occasionally or several times an hour and can feel like a wave of warmth through the body. In extreme cases they may be drenching sweats. Hot flushes can also occur at night. They may lessen after the first few months although for some women they will continue for the duration of treatment.

To reduce hot flushes try:

- Reducing your intake of alcohol, nicotine, spicy food or drinks containing caffeine.
- Maintaining a healthy weight and regularly exercising for a minimum of two hours per week.
- Minimising stress. Deep breathing can help you to relax.
- Yoga, meditation and relaxation techniques.
- Wearing cotton clothing and layers that can be taken off during a flush.

### Vaginal effects

- Reduced oestrogen can cause vaginal discharge, pain, bleeding, itching and dryness, and loss of libido (sex drive).
- Non-hormonal vaginal moisturisers like Replens™ or Sylk (available from a pharmacist) can help to reduce dryness, itch and discomfort especially during sex.
- Avoid using petroleum or oil-based lubricants as these can worsen vaginal dryness.
- Loss of libido can be complex to manage. Counselling may be beneficial and your nurse specialist can refer you for this.

### Mood swings

- Reduced oestrogen can cause changes in mood. You may feel low, anxious, and forgetful or experience reduced concentration.
- Relaxation, exercise, support groups and counselling can be helpful.
- Please contact your nurse specialist or doctor if you are concerned about mood changes.

### Nausea

- Feelings of sickness are usually mild and improve after a few weeks as your body adjusts to treatment. Taking your tablet with food or at night may help.

### Tiredness

- You may feel sleepy or low in energy when you begin taking an aromatase inhibitor. Try to pace yourself until this improves by balancing your physical exercise and rest. Regular exercise will help you to feel less tired.

### Bone thinning

- Aromatase inhibitors decrease bone mineral density, with a possible increased risk of a broken bone or fracture.
- If you are at risk of osteoporosis your doctor will recommend monitoring your bone health during treatment and may prescribe a drug to protect your bones.
- You can help to keep your bones strong by regular weight-bearing exercise, eating a healthy diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, not smoking, and following sensible guidelines for alcohol intake. Ministry of Health Guidelines recommend  $\leq 1$  unit per day and at least two alcohol free days per week.

### Less common side effects

- Headaches, skin rashes, dizziness, vaginal bleeding.
- Pain, numbness and tingling in the hands and fingers.
- Mild elevation in cholesterol levels.

Talk with your nurse specialist or doctor about any side effects you may be having. There may be ways to reduce the intensity of your symptoms or you may be able to try another medication.

Aromatase inhibitors have been shown to improve breast cancer outcomes, so your specialist team will work with you and support you in taking your hormonal therapy as prescribed so that you will gain the maximum benefit.

### Who to contact

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## The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation

For more resources and information contact us:

Freephone: 0800 902 732

Email: [breasthealth@bcf.org.nz](mailto:breasthealth@bcf.org.nz)

[www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz](http://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz)

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[www.mybc.care](http://www.mybc.care) (online community)

**ADVICE LINE:**

**0800 BCNurse**

(0800 2268 773)