

Aromatase Inhibitor Therapy for Breast Cancer

Your body uses hormones, including estrogen, in sexual development and pregnancy. But they also cause some types of breast cancer to grow and spread. When we found your breast cancer, we tested to see if it uses these hormones.

Some medicines can keep cancer cells from getting the hormones they need to grow. These are called endocrine therapies or hormone therapies. Aromatase inhibitors (AIs) are a pill form of endocrine therapy. Here are generic and brand names for AI medicines:

- Anastrozole (Arimidex®)
- Exemestane (Aromasin®)
- Letrozole (Femara®)

Your breast cancer is one of the types that endocrine therapy can help. Your doctor suggests that you take an AI in pill form.

How do AIs work?

When you are young, your ovaries make most of the estrogen in your body. Estrogen helps control your menstrual cycle. After your ovaries stop working, other body tissues such as fat cells still make small amounts of estrogen.

AIs stop your body from making estrogen. This starves a cancer that needs estrogen so its growth slows or stops. AIs work against the original breast cancer. They also starve any cancer cells that might have moved to other parts of the body such as bones, liver, or lung.

Why take AIs?

AIs can help keep breast cancer from coming back. In fact, they lower the risk of cancer coming back in the breast or other body parts by about one-half.

AIs can also lower the risk of new cancers developing in your breast. If you have had breast cancer and take an AI, your risk of getting another cancer in either breast goes down.

Some women who have never had breast cancer have a higher risk of getting it. They may take an AI to lower the risk.

Who should NOT take AIs?

AIs do not work for women who have active ovaries, which means they produce estrogen. Having menstrual periods is a sign that your ovaries are active. Some women may have active ovaries even if they do not have regular periods.

Before you take an AI, your cancer care team will be sure your ovaries are no longer active and producing estrogen. This means you are in menopause. It happens in one of these ways.

- Your ovaries have been removed with surgery.
- You take medicine that stops your ovaries from working.
- Your ovaries already naturally stopped with age.

If you start having periods again while taking AIs, talk with your cancer care team right away. Also tell your health care team if you have hot flashes and they go away when you take AIs. If you are in menopause naturally or with medicine, these things could mean your ovaries have started to work again.

**Talk with your cancer care team
before starting any new medicines or
supplements. Some of them can
keep AIs from working.**

How long will I take AIs?

You may take AIs for 5–10 years. Your health care team will talk with you about how long to take the medicine.

What are the side effects of AIs?

You may have some side effects when you take AIs. Here is a list, starting with the most common:

Aches and pains in joints and bones

- Get daily exercise to help ease aches and pains.
- Take over-the-counter pain medicines as needed. Ibuprofen or acetaminophen are examples.
- Talk with your health care team about other medicines if the pain gets worse.

Hot flashes

- Talk to your health care team about medicines that can help if hot flashes change your daily activities or keep you from sleeping.
- Do not take soy-based products to treat hot flashes.

Dryness of the vagina

- Use vaginal moisturizers daily or as needed.
- Use water-based lubricants to make having sex more comfortable.
- Your health care team may consider a product with low doses of estrogen. Ask them if this is right for you.

Osteoporosis (weak bones)

- Do weight-bearing exercise such as walking to help keep your bones strong.

- Take 1200 mg of calcium daily. Spread your calcium doses through the day, either in your food or in supplements. Also take 800-1000 IU of vitamin D3 every day. Many supplements have both calcium and vitamin D3.
- Talk with your health care team about bone density scans. These scans check for osteoporosis.

Carpal tunnel syndrome or trigger finger

- Watch for signs of carpal tunnel syndrome, including numbness and tingling in your fingers.
- Watch for signs of trigger finger. This means a finger joint “sticks” and does not move freely.
- Talk to your health care team if either of these happen while you are taking AIs.

Contact the Linda B. and Robert B. Wiggins Wellness and Integrative Health Center
for free help with exercise programs and nutrition counseling.

801-587-4585

www.huntsmancancer.org/wellness