

Tamoxifen 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. Tamoxifen is a type of endocrine therapy in pill form.

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

Why take tamoxifen?

Tamoxifen can help keep breast cancer from coming back. Tamoxifen can also treat any cancer cells that might have moved to other parts of the body such as bones, liver, or lung. In fact, it lowers the risk of cancer coming back in the breast or other body parts by 40–50% (almost one-half).

Tamoxifen can also lower the risk of new cancers developing in your breast. If you have had breast cancer and take tamoxifen, 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 also take tamoxifen to lower the risk.

How does tamoxifen work?

Tamoxifen acts differently in different parts of your body. In the breast, it keeps estrogen from feeding breast cancer cells so their growth slows or stops. In many other parts of the body such as your bones, liver, and uterus, tamoxifen acts like estrogen. For example, it helps prevent or treat bone loss, called osteoporosis.

Precautions

Birth control. It is not safe to get pregnant while taking tamoxifen. If you are still having menstrual periods, you must use birth control. These are acceptable birth control methods:

- Condoms

- Diaphragm
- Intrauterine device (IUD)

These methods are not permanent. You may still be able to get pregnant after you stop taking tamoxifen.

Tubal ligation, called tying your tubes, and vasectomy for your partner are also acceptable. These methods are permanent.

Even if you are not having menstrual periods, your health care team may find that you are still able to get pregnant. If so, you will need to use birth control.

Blood clots. Women with a history of serious blood clots SHOULD NOT take tamoxifen. Another name for these blood clots is deep vein thrombosis (DVT).

Side Effects of Tamoxifen

You may have some side effects when taking tamoxifen. Here is a list, starting with the most common:

Hot flashes

If hot flashes change your daily activities or keep you from sleeping, talk to your health care team about medicines that can help.

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.

Muscle cramps

- Get daily exercise to help ease muscle cramps.
- Drink plenty of water.
- 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.

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.

Blood clots

Tamoxifen raises your risk of getting a blood clot in your veins. Blood clots are also called deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or pulmonary embolism (PE). They can be deadly.

Women with a history of serious blood clots, DVT, or PE should NOT take tamoxifen.

- Call your health care team right away if you have either of these signs:
 - Pain, redness, and swelling in the leg
 - Shortness of breath and chest pain
- If you are planning to have surgery, let your surgeon know you are taking tamoxifen. Stopping tamoxifen around the time of your surgery may lower your chance of getting a blood clot.

Cancer of the uterus (womb)

If you no longer have menstrual periods, tamoxifen raises the risk of developing cancer in the uterus.

- See your health care provider for a gynecology exam every year.
- See your health care provider right away if you have unusual bleeding or pain in the lower part of your belly.

Vision changes

- Tamoxifen may cause changes to the lens of your eye.
- Get an eye exam every year.
- Tell your cancer care team if you have a history of cataracts.

Tamoxifen may cause or worsen depression in women who have a personal or family history of it.

- Talk with your health care provider if you get signs of depression that keep you from functioning well:
 - Sad, hopeless, or empty feelings most of the time
 - Loss of interest or enjoyment in favorite activities
 - Trouble sleeping
- Talk with Huntsman Cancer Institute's social workers to help cope with depression. Call our Patient and Family Support team at 801-213-5699, Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

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