

Taxol (paclitaxel) Factsheet

This factsheet explains briefly what Taxol is, when it may be prescribed, how it works, what the benefits are and what side effects may occur.

Taxol is the brand name of the drug and what we call it in this factsheet. Most people know it by this name, although its generic (non-branded) name is paclitaxel. You may find it useful to read this factsheet with our [Chemotherapy for breast cancer booklet](#).

What is Taxol?

Taxol is a chemotherapy drug that belongs to a group of drugs called taxanes.

Who might be offered Taxol?

Taxol can be used to treat breast cancer that has come back following treatment and has spread to areas around the breast such as the lymph nodes above or below the collarbone (regional recurrence). It can also be used to treat people with secondary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has spread to other parts of the body). It may be used either when the cancer has not responded to previous chemotherapy drugs or when other chemotherapy drugs are not appropriate. Taxol can be given in combination with other chemotherapy drugs or on its own.

Taxol may sometimes be used to treat primary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has not spread to other parts of the body) or it might be given as part of a clinical trial for primary breast cancer.

For more information see our [Clinical trials and breast cancer factsheet](#).

How does Taxol work?

Chemotherapy drugs interfere with how cancer cells develop and grow, and different drugs do this in different ways. Taxol works by blocking part of the cancer cell before it can divide and grow, and making it die at an early stage. Because it works in a particular way, Taxol may be effective when breast cancer is not responding to other types of chemotherapy drugs.

How is Taxol given?

Taxol is given as a drip into a vein (intravenously) in the hand or arm. It can be given over a three-hour period once every three weeks or it may be given weekly in lower doses over one hour.

The break between each course of treatment gives your body time to recover, and may vary depending on whether the number of cells in the blood have returned to normal between each cycle.

Taxol is sometimes given with other types of chemotherapy and anti-cancer drugs. Your specialist will probably want to assess how well the treatment is working after the first two or three sessions.

What are the side effects of Taxol?

Like any drug, Taxol can cause side effects. However, everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people have more side effects than others. The side effects of Taxol can usually be controlled and those described here will not affect everyone. If you are concerned about any side effects, regardless of whether they are listed here, talk to your chemotherapy nurse or cancer specialist (oncologist).

If you are being given other chemotherapy or anti-cancer drugs with Taxol, you may have additional side effects from these drugs.

For more information about the side effects of chemotherapy, see our [Chemotherapy for breast cancer](#) booklet.

Common side effects

Bone marrow suppression

Chemotherapy drugs, including Taxol, affect healthy blood cells within the body and the bone marrow (the spongy material found in the hollow part of bones) where blood cells are made. Blood cells (white blood cells, platelets and red blood cells) are released by the bone marrow to replace those naturally used up within the body. Chemotherapy reduces the ability of the bone marrow to make these cells. This can lead to an increased risk of getting an infection because of a low white blood cell count.

If Taxol is being given every three weeks, your resistance to infection is at its lowest point around 10 days after the chemotherapy. If you feel unwell or have a temperature above 38 degrees centigrade at any time during your treatment, you should contact the hospital immediately, even if it is at the weekend or during the night. You may need to be treated with antibiotics. You will have regular blood tests throughout your treatment to check your blood count, and if the number of blood cells is too low, it may be necessary to delay or reduce the dose of the next course of treatment. In some circumstances your doctor may recommend growth factor injections to stimulate the production of white blood cells. Increasing production of white blood cells reduces the risk of infection.

Because Taxol can reduce the number of platelets (which help the blood to clot), you may find you bruise more easily, have nosebleeds or notice that your gums bleed when you brush your teeth. You should tell your specialist team if you experience any of these symptoms.

Some people become anaemic because of a low red blood cell count. If you feel particularly tired, breathless or dizzy, you should let your specialist team know. Occasionally a blood transfusion may be necessary at some point during your treatment

Hair loss (alopecia)

The drug Taxol causes hair loss. Most people will lose all their hair, including eyebrows, eyelashes and body hair. You may begin to lose your hair about two weeks after the first treatment, or sometimes earlier. Hair loss is usually gradual but it can happen very quickly, sometimes over a couple of days. It can sometimes be minimised by scalp cooling. The hair loss should be temporary and in most cases your hair will begin to grow back a few weeks after your treatment has ended. Prolonged or permanent hair loss has been reported in a very small number of cases.

For more information about hair loss, including scalp cooling, see our [Breast cancer and hair loss](#) booklet.

Nausea

Nausea is a fairly common side effect of Taxol, although it is usually mild and most people will not actually be sick. You may start to feel unwell a few hours after your treatment but you will usually be prescribed anti-sickness drugs to reduce or stop this happening.

For more information about nausea see our [Chemotherapy for breast cancer](#) booklet.

Numbness and/or tingling in hands or feet

Some people receiving Taxol experience numbness or tingling in their hands and feet. This is due to the effect of Taxol on the nerves and is known as peripheral neuropathy. In most cases it is mild and goes away soon after treatment stops. If it is severe it may be necessary either to reduce the dose of Taxol or to stop it completely. This side effect normally improves a few months after the treatment has finished, but may not disappear completely.

If you are experiencing numbness or tingling it is advisable to mention this to your specialist when you see them next, so that the symptoms can be monitored.

Skin reactions

You may develop a rash anywhere on your body, which can be red and itchy. Your doctor may prescribe medicine to help with this.

Sore mouth

You may find that your mouth becomes sore and small ulcers can develop. Your specialist or chemotherapy nurse can advise you on suitable mouthwashes or medicine if a mouth infection develops. For more information on coping with a sore mouth see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

Taste changes

During the time you are having chemotherapy your taste can change and some food may taste different. You may find you no longer like some foods you used to enjoy. Your taste should return to normal once your treatment has finished.

Diarrhoea

You may experience mild diarrhoea but your specialist or GP can prescribe medicine to help control it. If you develop severe diarrhoea, you should contact your specialist team.

Painful muscles and joints

Your muscles or joints may ache or become painful two to three days after you have your treatment. This is a very common side effect and usually wears off after a few days. Occasionally it can be severe and you may need to take mild pain relief and/or anti-inflammatory drugs. It is a good idea to make sure you have some of these available before starting your treatment just in case.

Tiredness or fatigue

You may become extremely tired during your treatment and for some people this fatigue can last for several weeks or even months after the treatment has finished. If you feel like this, it is important to get plenty of rest. Your ability to concentrate or think clearly can be affected, which can be very frustrating. This is sometimes called 'chemo-brain' or 'chemo-fog' and usually improves over time after treatment has finished.

Gentle exercise, such as short walks, can help improve fatigue.

Nail reactions

The colour of your nails may change after several treatments with Taxol but if this happens, it will normally grow out over several months. The nails may also become brittle, crack, and/or experience a change in texture such as the formation of ridges and occasionally total loss of the nail. Placing the nails in ice-cold water during each treatment may help reduce this.

Pain in the injection site

In a few cases, pain can occur where the needle has been inserted or anywhere along the vein. If you experience pain, tell your chemotherapy nurse. After a few weeks you may notice tenderness, darkening and hardening a few centimetres above where the needle was inserted. This should fade in time.

Effects on fertility

It is not known exactly what effect Taxol may have on your fertility. This will also depend on any other chemotherapy drugs you may be receiving at the time, or have received in the past, and your age. Women aged around 40 and above are less likely to get their periods back after completing chemotherapy than women under this age. Although some women stop having periods (amenorrhoea), this may be temporary. It is important to use a barrier method of contraception, such as condoms, to prevent pregnancy while you are having Taxol, as it may have a harmful effect on a developing baby.

If you are concerned about your fertility, it is important to talk to your specialist team before treatment begins. If you want to know more about preserving your fertility, or pregnancy after treatment, see our **Fertility issues and breast cancer treatment** booklet.

Changes in heart rate and blood pressure

Taxol can slow the heart rate and alter blood pressure, so you will be monitored carefully for this during your treatment. If it happens, it can be treated easily and does not mean you will have to stop your treatment. This is not the same as having an allergic reaction to Taxol (see below).

Rare side effects

Allergic reaction

If you have an allergic reaction to Taxol, it will probably happen within the first few minutes of your treatment. Reactions can vary from mild to severe, although severe reactions are uncommon. Before your treatment starts, you will be given a combination of drugs (for example, steroids) to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction. These are usually given into a vein (intravenously) before the Taxol infusion.

You will be monitored closely during your treatment so that any reaction can be dealt with immediately. Symptoms include flushing, skin rash, itching, back pain, shortness of breath, faintness, fever or chills. If you have a severe reaction, treatment will be stopped immediately. Your doctor will discuss with you whether a different combination of drugs to prevent allergic reactions may be possible or whether you should be given Taxol again.

Effects on the liver

Taxol may affect how well your liver works. This is temporary and will return to normal when the treatment has stopped. You will have regular blood tests to monitor this throughout your treatment.

Travel and vaccinations

You may be planning to travel abroad during or immediately after treatment. If you require travel vaccination, it is important to be aware not only that vaccines may be less effective if given during treatment, but also that live vaccines can cause serious infections. These include vaccines that protect against measles, rubella, yellow fever and typhoid. If you are planning a trip and need vaccinations, discuss this with your specialist. Some specialists advise against live vaccines for six months after chemotherapy or until your immune system has fully recovered from the treatment.

For more information see our booklets on:
Chemotherapy for breast cancer BCC16
Clinical trials and breast cancer BCC24
Breast cancer and hair loss BCC54
Fertility issues and breast cancer treatment BCC28

To order, or download a copy, please visit
www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications

Further support

If you have any concerns about taking Taxol, you can talk to your specialist, chemotherapy nurse or breast care nurse. You may also find it helpful to talk to someone who has had a similar experience to you. You can do this one to one or in a support group. For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call our helpline.

Breast Cancer Care

Breast Cancer Care is here to support you. From diagnosis, throughout treatment and beyond, our services are here every step of the way.

Our free, confidential **helpline** is here for anyone who has questions about breast cancer or breast health. Your call will be answered by one of our nurses or trained staff members with experience of breast cancer.

Our **website** gives instant access to information when you need it. It's also home to the largest online breast cancer community in the UK, so you can share your questions or concerns with other people in a similar situation.

Our **One-to-one support** service can put you in touch with someone who knows what you're going through. Just tell us what you'd like to talk about and we can find someone who's right for you.

Through our professionally-hosted **discussion forums** you can exchange tips on coping with the side effects of treatment, ask questions, share experiences and talk through concerns online. If you're feeling anxious or just need to hear from someone else who's been there, they offer a way to gain support and reassurance from others in a similar situation to you.

We host weekly **Live chat** sessions on our website offering you a private space to discuss your concerns with others – getting instant responses to messages and talking about issues that are important to you.

If you find it difficult to talk about breast cancer, we can answer your questions by email instead - our **Ask the nurse** service is available on the website.

Telephone support groups offer the chance to be part of a regular support group which you can join easily by phone.

We run **Information and support sessions and courses** for people living with and beyond breast cancer, bringing people together to share experiences. We also offer practical sessions to help with issues such as hair loss and finding a suitable bra after surgery. We also offer specific, tailored courses to younger women, and people living with secondary breast cancer.

Our free **information resources** for anyone affected by breast cancer include factsheets, booklets and DVDs. You can order our publications by using our order form, which can be requested from the helpline. All our publications can also be downloaded from our website.

To request a free leaflet containing further information about our services for **people having treatment for breast cancer** or **people with secondary breast cancer** please contact your nearest centre (contact details at the back) or visit **www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications**

Other organisations

Macmillan Cancer Support
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ

General enquiries: **020 7840 7840**
Helpline: **0808 808 0000**
Website: **www.macmillan.org.uk**
Textphone: **0808 808 0121** or **Text Relay**

Macmillan Cancer Support provides practical, medical, emotional and financial support to people living with cancer and their carers and families. Over the phone, its cancer support specialists can answer questions about cancer types and treatments, provide practical and financial support to help people live with cancer, and are there if someone just wants to talk. Its website features expert, high-quality information on cancer types and treatments, emotional, financial and practical help, and an online community where people can share information and support. Macmillan also funds expert health and social care professionals such as nurses, doctors and benefits advisers.

Marie Curie Cancer Care
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP

Administration: **020 7599 7777**
Email: **info@mariecurie.org.uk**
Website: **www.mariecurie.org.uk**

Marie Curie Cancer Care provides high quality nursing, totally free, to give terminally ill people the choice of dying at home supported by their families.

Notes

Notes

A large print version of this factsheet can be downloaded from our website, www.breastcancercare.org.uk. It is also available in Braille or on audio CD on request by phoning **0845 092 0808**.

This leaflet has been produced by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.

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Breast Cancer Care is here for anyone affected by breast cancer. We bring people together, provide information and support, and campaign for improved standards of care. We use our understanding of people's experience of breast cancer and our clinical expertise in everything we do.

Visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay **18001**).

Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care.

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