

## Taxol (paclitaxel)

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, which is used throughout 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 taxoids or taxanes.

### Who might be offered Taxol?

Taxol is used to treat people with secondary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has spread to other parts of the body) where either the cancer has not responded to previous chemotherapy drugs or other chemotherapy drugs are not appropriate. It may be used as a treatment for secondary breast cancer in combination with Herceptin (trastuzumab). For more information see our **Herceptin** factsheet.

Taxol may be used to treat primary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has not spread to other parts of the body) only under some circumstances, for example, as part of a clinical trial. For more information see our **Clinical trials and breast cancer** factsheet. It may also be offered after certain other chemotherapy drugs (for example anthracycline and cyclophosphamide).

### 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 different way, Taxol can be effective when cancer is not responding to other types of chemotherapy drugs.

### How is Taxol given?

Taxol is given as a drip into a vein in the hand or arm. It is normally given over a three hour period once every three weeks. You will usually have up to six treatments as an outpatient. Sometimes it may be given weekly in lower doses over one hour to try to minimise its side effects.

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. If you are concerned about any side effects, 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.

### Hair loss (alopecia)

Most people will lose all their hair, including eyebrows, eyelashes and body hair, which can be a shock. You may begin to lose your hair about two weeks after the first treatment. Hair loss is usually gradual but it can happen very quickly, sometimes over a couple of days. The hair loss is temporary and your hair will begin to grow back about a month after your treatment has ended. Hair loss can sometimes be minimised by scalp cooling. You can ask your chemotherapy nurse or cancer specialist if this is available to you.

For more information about hair loss, see our **Breast cancer and hair loss** booklet.

### Effects on the blood

Taxol can have a temporary effect on bone marrow, which is where blood cells (white blood cells, platelets and red blood cells) are made. This can result in an increased risk of getting an infection because of a low white cell count, so it may help to eat healthily, take care to avoid damaging your skin and, where possible, avoid crowds and people who might have infections. You may find you bruise more easily or cuts bleed for longer because of a low platelet count, as platelets help blood to clot. Occasionally some people experience anaemia because of a low red cell count.

Your blood count will normally fall about seven to ten days after day one, your treatment day on a three weekly schedule. If it drops below a certain level your next treatment may be delayed until your white cell count is within safe levels. You will have

regular blood tests throughout your treatment. If you feel unwell and/or have a raised temperature following your chemotherapy, contact your hospital doctor without delay. To reduce the effects on your white blood cells, your doctor may recommend the use of a drug known as a growth factor to reduce the fall in your blood count and shorten the time when you are most vulnerable to infection.

### 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 to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction. It is important that you take these as directed by your specialist team and do not stop taking them without talking with the team first.

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 if you should not be given Taxol again.

### 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 the drug or to stop it completely. This side effect normally improves after a few months 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. Some people do need painkillers to help with the sensations experienced.

### Nausea

Nausea is a very common side effect, although it is usually mild and most people will not actually be sick. You may start to feel sick a few hours after your treatment but you will usually be given medication to stop this happening.

For more information about nausea see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

### 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 and mouth care. For more information on coping with a sore mouth see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

### Diarrhoea

You may experience mild diarrhoea but your specialist or GP can prescribe medication to help control it.

### Painful muscles and joints

Your muscles or joints may ache or become painful two to three days after you have your treatment. This usually wears off after a few days, although occasionally it can be severe and you may need to take mild painkillers and/or anti-inflammatory drugs.

### Tiredness or fatigue

You may become very tired after each treatment and this can sometimes 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. Gentle exercise, such as short walks, can also help with feelings of fatigue.

### Changes in heart rate and blood pressure

On rare occasions Taxol can slow the heart rate and lower the blood pressure so you will be carefully monitored for this during your treatment. If it happens it can be treated easily and doesn't mean you will have to stop your treatment. This is not the same as having an allergic reaction to Taxol (see page 2).

### Pain in the injection site

In a few cases mild pain can occur where the needle has been inserted or anywhere along the vein. If you are in 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 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.

### Effects on fertility

It is not known exactly what effect Taxol may have on your fertility. Taxol may interfere with your normal menstrual cycle (periods). Some women may stop having periods (amenorrhoea), although this may be temporary and it is important to use a barrier method of contraception, such as condoms, to prevent pregnancy while you are having Taxol.

## 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. Live vaccines include those that protect against measles, rubella, yellow fever and typhoid. If you are planning a trip and need vaccinations do discuss this with your specialist. Some specialists advise not to have live vaccines for six months after chemotherapy or until your immune system has fully recovered from the treatment.

## 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.

## Further help from Breast Cancer Care

For further medical information, emotional support, and details of our services, call our helpline free on **0808 800 6000** (for Typetalk prefix **18001**).

Breast Cancer Care's website has an email enquiries service called Ask the nurse, along with forums and live chat sessions where you can share your views with people in a similar situation. For more information about these services and other online support, visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk).

In addition, our centres provide one-to-one support and other services, including: Healthy Living Days; Living with Breast Cancer courses; 'HeadStrong', for people experiencing hair loss from chemotherapy; and Younger Women's Forums for the under-45s.

You can contact the centres as follows:

- **North & Midlands** Tel: 0845 077 1893  
Email: [nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:nrc@breastcancercare.org.uk)
- **London & South** Tel: 0845 077 1895  
Email: [src@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:src@breastcancercare.org.uk)
- **Scotland** Tel: 0845 077 1892 Email: [sco@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:sco@breastcancercare.org.uk)
- **Cymru/Wales** Tel: 0845 077 1894 Email: [cym@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:cym@breastcancercare.org.uk)

Breast Cancer Care also has a wide range of publications to guide you from diagnosis to living well after treatment. You can download and order our publications at [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk) or call our helpline on **0808 800 6000** for a printed order form.

## Other organisations

### **Cancerbackup**

3 Bath Place, Rivington Street,  
London EC2A 3JR  
Office: 020 7696 9003  
Freephone helpline: 0808 800 1234  
Email: [info@cancerbackup.org](mailto:info@cancerbackup.org)  
Website: [www.cancerbackup.org.uk](http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk)

Cancerbackup is the leading national information and support charity for people affected by cancer. Services include a helpline, staffed by specialist cancer information nurses, a website, cancer information booklets and local information centres. All Cancerbackup services are free to people affected by cancer.

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ  
Telephone: 020 7840 7840  
Macmillan CancerLine: 0808 808 2020  
Textphone: 0808 808 0121  
Email: [cancerline@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:cancerline@macmillan.org.uk)  
Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Macmillan Cancer Support is helping people who are living with cancer through the provision of immediate practical and emotional support. Specialist services include Macmillan nurses and doctors, cancer centres, a range of cancer information and direct financial help. The Macmillan CancerLine provides information and emotional support. Textphone available.

## About Breast Cancer Care

Breast Cancer Care is the UK's leading provider of information, practical assistance and emotional support for anyone affected by breast cancer. Every year we respond to over two million requests for support and information about breast cancer or breast health concerns. All our services are free.

We are committed to campaigning for better treatment and support for people with breast cancer and their families.

For more information visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk) or call the Breast Cancer Care helpline free on **0808 800 6000** (for Typetalk prefix **18001**). Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care.

**This factsheet 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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