

## Aromasin (exemestane)

This factsheet explains briefly what Aromasin is, how it works, when it may be prescribed, what the benefits are and what side effects may occur. Aromasin is the brand name of the drug, which is used in this factsheet. Most people know it by this name, although its generic (non-branded) name is exemestane.

### **What is Aromasin?**

Aromasin is a drug used to treat breast cancer in post-menopausal women (women who have gone through the menopause/change of life). It is a type of hormone treatment and is one of a group of drugs called aromatase inhibitors.

### **How does it work?**

The female hormone oestrogen stimulates some

breast cancers to grow (oestrogen receptor positive breast cancer). When a woman has been through the menopause, oestrogen is mainly produced in body fat. Other hormones (androgens) are converted into oestrogen within fatty tissue by an enzyme known as aromatase. Aromasin works by stopping the conversion of androgens into oestrogen and so reducing the amount of oestrogen circulating in the body.

Aromasin will be prescribed only if your breast cancer is sensitive to oestrogen (oestrogen receptor positive tumours). There is a test to check if the breast cancer cells have oestrogen receptors. If you have breast cancer that does not rely on oestrogen to grow (oestrogen receptor

negative tumours) Aromasin will have no effect.

## **When is Aromasin prescribed?**

Aromasin is approved for use in the treatment of post-menopausal women with primary breast cancer (breast cancer that started in the breast and has not spread to other parts of the body) who have been taking tamoxifen for two or three years, once tamoxifen has been stopped. Studies have shown that the two drugs in sequence are more effective at preventing breast cancer from spreading or returning than tamoxifen alone.

Aromasin can also be used to treat secondary breast cancer in post-menopausal women if their breast cancer has come back or progressed while they were on other hormone treatments.

If you have responded to hormone therapies before, there is a good chance you will respond to a different type of hormone therapy. Trials have shown that Aromasin can

be effective in women with secondary breast cancer who have previously responded to tamoxifen and other hormone treatments.

## **How is Aromasin taken?**

Aromasin comes as a tablet (25 mg) that you take once a day and it is recommended that you take it after food. It is best to take it at the same time each day. If you miss a dose you don't need to take an extra dose the next day. The level of the drug in your body will remain high enough from the previous day.

If for any reason you want to stop taking Aromasin, it is important to consult your specialist first.

## **How long will I take Aromasin for?**

This will vary from person to person. If you are taking Aromasin for primary breast cancer you will usually take the drug for two to three years.

If you are taking Aromasin for secondary breast cancer you will usually continue to take the drug for as long as it is

keeping your cancer under control. Your specialist will discuss with you how long you need to carry on taking it.

## **What are the side effects of Aromasin?**

Everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people may experience more side effects than others. Any side effects from Aromasin are not severe and it is rare for someone to stop taking Aromasin because of the side effects.

The main side effects of Femara are listed below. It is important to remember that you may not get any of these.

### **Common side effects**

These can include joint pain, muscle stiffness, tiredness, dizziness, headache, difficulty sleeping and increased perspiration.

You may experience nausea (feeling sick), which may only be when you first start taking Aromasin. This can sometimes be helped by taking your tablet with food. If this doesn't help, talk to your specialist, as there are other ways of

controlling this side effect.

As with most hormonal treatments, you may experience menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes. For further information and advice on how to relieve these symptoms, see our **Menopausal symptoms and breast cancer** factsheet. You may also want to look at our **Complementary therapies** booklet as some people have found these approaches useful in relieving symptoms.

Aromasin reduces the amount of oestrogen in the body and lack of oestrogen over time can cause osteoporosis (thinning of the bone). Because of this your specialist may want to check your bone density (strength and thickness) with a scan before you start taking Aromasin and while you are taking it. To help keep your bones healthy you can increase your intake of calcium and vitamin D. You can do this by taking a supplement or eating more foods rich in calcium and vitamin D such as milk, cheese, yoghurt and cereals.

Stopping smoking and regular weight-bearing exercise also help to keep your bones strong.

If your bones are already beginning to show signs of thinning or if you already have osteoporosis you may not be given Aromasin because of the risk of further damage to the bones. Alternatively, you may be given an additional drug called a bisphosphonate to increase bone density and strength. If you are concerned about this you may find it helpful to speak to your oncologist. You can also find out more from our **Osteoporosis and breast cancer** leaflet and our **Bisphosphonates** factsheet.

### **Less common side effects**

These include stomach pain, skin rashes, loss of appetite, indigestion, constipation, negative feelings and depression.

### **Can I take Aromasin with other drugs?**

It is not advisable to take other drugs containing oestrogen,

such as the contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy (HRT), while you are taking Aromasin.

Other drugs that are thought to reduce the effectiveness of Aromasin include:

- the anti-tuberculous (TB) drug rifampicin
- the anti-convulsants phenytoin sodium and carbamazepine
- the herbal remedy St John's wort.

It is a good idea to talk to your specialist or pharmacist if you are taking any other medicines at the same time as Aromasin.

### **Further support**

If you have any concerns about taking Aromasin you can talk to your specialist 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. If you would like to know more, call our freephone helpline or speak to your breast care nurse to find out about local support groups.

## 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 discussion 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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