

Anastrozole (Arimidex®)



This factsheet is about a treatment for breast cancer called anastrozole, which is also called Arimidex®. It explains what anastrozole is, how it works, when it might be prescribed, what the benefits are, and what side-effects may occur. For more information call the **National Cancer Helpline** on **1800 200 700** or visit **www.cancer.ie**.

What is anastrozole?

Anastrozole is a hormone therapy used to treat breast cancer in postmenopausal women (women who no longer have their periods).

How does anastrozole work?

Anastrozole reduces the amount of the hormone oestrogen in your body. Hormones are substances made by your body that help to control how it works. Many breast cancers need the hormone oestrogen to grow. When your periods have stopped (menopause), oestrogen is no longer made by your ovaries. Instead oestrogen is made by changing other sex hormones called androgens into oestrogen. Androgens are made in your adrenal glands. An enzyme called aromatase changes androgens into oestrogen. Anastrozole works by blocking aromatase, which reduces the amount of oestrogen in your body. As less oestrogen reaches

the cancer cells, they grow more slowly or stop growing altogether. This can also reduce the risk of cancer coming back. Drugs that work in this way are called aromatase inhibitors.

When is anastrozole prescribed?

Anastrozole will only be prescribed if your breast cancer grows with the help of oestrogen. This is called oestrogen receptor positive cancer. Anastrozole is only suitable if you have been through the menopause. It is not usually prescribed if you have osteoporosis (thinning and weakening of the bones) because of the risk of further damage to your bones.

- **Early breast cancer**

Anastrozole may be used to treat women with early breast cancer (cancer that has not spread) after their surgery. This is called adjuvant therapy. It may also

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be given after you have taken the drug tamoxifen for 2-3 years, as studies have shown that switching may be better for some women. Anastrozole is also used if you are unable to take tamoxifen because of the possible risk of side-effects.

- **Advanced breast cancer**

Anastrozole may also be prescribed if your breast cancer comes back in your breast (local recurrence) or spreads to another part of your body (secondary breast cancer) while you are still taking tamoxifen or other anti-oestrogen hormones. In this situation you will usually continue to take anastrozole for as long as your breast cancer remains under control. If your breast cancer does progress while you are taking anastrozole, there are other hormone treatments that may be effective.

If you're admitted to hospital, it's important to tell the doctors and nurses looking after you that you are having hormonal treatment. If you were not admitted under your cancer specialist, tell the team who you are under, in case they need advice or information.

How is anastrozole taken?

Anastrozole comes as a tablet (1 mg), which you take once a day. It is best to take it with water and at the same time every 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 from the previous day. It is important not to stop taking anastrozole without talking to your specialist first. Store anastrozole tablets out of reach of children, at room temperature, away from heat, light and moisture.

How long will I have to take anastrozole?

If you have early breast cancer, you will usually take anastrozole for 5 years. Sometimes you may be switched to anastrozole after 2-3 years of taking tamoxifen, finishing up after a total of 5 years.

Taking anastrozole



Hints & tips

- Keep your tablets in a safe place, in the original packaging.
- Keep anastrozole at room temperature, away from heat and direct sunlight and out of the reach of children.
- Don't worry if you forget to take your tablet. There is no need to take a double dose the next day. A level of the drug will stay in your blood, but try not to miss more than one or two tablets in a row.
- If your doctor decides to stop the treatment, return any remaining tablets to the pharmacist. Don't flush them down the toilet or throw them away.
- Remember to get your new prescription before you run out of tablets and make sure that you have plenty for holidays.

What are the possible side-effects of anastrozole?

Everyone reacts differently to drugs. Some people experience more side-effects than others. Anastrozole usually causes only a few side-effects, which can be kept under control. The known side-effects of anastrozole are listed below. It is important to remember that you may not get any of these. Let your doctor or nurse know about any side-effects you have. Most side-effects can be controlled or improved.

Common side-effects:

- **Joint discomfort**

Pain or stiffness in your joints can occur when taking anastrozole. It is usually fairly mild and can sometimes be relieved by gentle exercise or mild painkillers. However, in some rare cases it may be severe enough for your specialist to advise you to stop treatment.

- **Menopausal symptoms**

Symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats are common but tend to be mild and usually improve after a short while. You can do practical things to help yourself such as wearing cotton clothing and reducing your intake of caffeine and alcohol. Some people find complementary therapies helpful, for example, reflexology. Another menopausal symptom you may notice is vaginal dryness. Vaginal moisturisers or lubricants can be helpful and are available without prescription from your pharmacy. For further information see our factsheet *Managing Menopausal Symptoms* and our booklet *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*.

- **Fatigue and tiredness**

Fatigue and tiredness may also be a problem for some women, and you may find you need more rest than usual. For a copy of our booklet *Coping with Fatigue*, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit www.cancer.ie.

- **Osteoporosis**

Osteoporosis (thinning of your bones) may affect some women taking anastrozole. This is because anastrozole works by reducing the amount of oestrogen in your body. Over a long time having less oestrogen in your body can cause osteoporosis. Your specialist usually checks the density (strength and thickness) of your bones with a DEXA scan before you start taking anastrozole. You may not be given anastrozole if you already have osteoporosis because of the risk of further damage to your bones. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for information on our bone health factsheet.

Less common side-effects

You may have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite or diarrhoea. These symptoms tend to be mild and temporary and can usually be helped by taking your tablets with food or at bedtime.

Anastrozole has lactose in it but the amount is very small. It may rarely cause some stomach upset if you are lactose intolerant.

You may have other less common side-effects such as headache, weakness or a skin rash. These are usually temporary and should wear off after a short time. Let your specialist know if you do experience any of these side-effects.

You may find that your hair gets slightly thinner while you are taking anastrozole. This is not usually noticeable and your hair will grow back when you stop taking it.

Let your doctor or nurse know about any side-effects you have. Most side-effects can be controlled or improved.

Rare side-effects

Vaginal bleeding is a rare side-effect of anastrozole. This can happen in the first few weeks after starting the treatment. It can occur when changing from one hormone tablet to another. If bleeding continues, you need to tell your cancer specialist or specialist nurse. Do not stop taking your anastrozole without consulting your specialist.

Can I take anastrozole with other drugs?

Drugs containing oestrogen, such as the contraceptive pill or HRT, should not be taken while you are taking anastrozole because they stop it working effectively. Make sure you tell your doctor about any other medicines you are taking, including vitamins or non-prescription items such as herbal remedies. Some herbal items containing plant oestrogens (phyto-oestrogens) may not be safe.

Further support

If you have any concerns about taking anastrozole, you can talk to your specialist, breast care nurse or oncology nurse. You might also find it easier to share your feelings with someone who has had a similar experience to you. For example, *Survivors Supporting Survivors* is a programme set up to help and support people who have recently had a cancer diagnosis. It involves personal contact between you and a *Survivors Supporting Survivors* volunteer, who has had treatment for cancer. Carefully selected and fully trained volunteers are available to provide advice and reassurance at a time when you are most in need of both. For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call the National Cancer Helpline on Freephone 1800 200 700.

Useful organisations and websites

American Cancer Society

Website: www.cancer.org

Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute

Tel: 01 280 4839

Email: info@indi.ie

Website: www.indi.ie

Irish Osteoporosis Society

Website: www.osteoporosis.ie

Daffodil Centres

The Irish Cancer Society's Daffodil Centres provide cancer information, support and advice in local hospitals. Daffodil Centres aim to provide a wide range of information locally to anyone affected by or concerned about cancer.

For details of your nearest Daffodil Centre call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit www.cancer.ie.



For more information on anastrozole or for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists, call the **National Cancer Helpline on Freephone**

1800 200 700

(Monday–Thursday, 9am–7pm,
Friday 9am–5pm) or email
helpline@irishcancer.ie



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