Roche

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Breast Cancer

Coping with side effects of breast cancer hormone treatment

A booklet for patients with hormone sensitive breast cancer

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What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among **women**, particularly those who are **50 years-old or older**.

There are 3 main types:

> **Hormone receptor positive** breast cancer

> **HER2 positive** breast cancer

> **Triple negative** breast cancer (which does not have hormone receptors)

Around **7** in **10** women with breast cancer have **hormone receptor positive** breast cancer

To find out if the breast cancer is hormone receptor positive, doctors may examine a piece of cancer tissue (**a biopsy**) under the microscope.

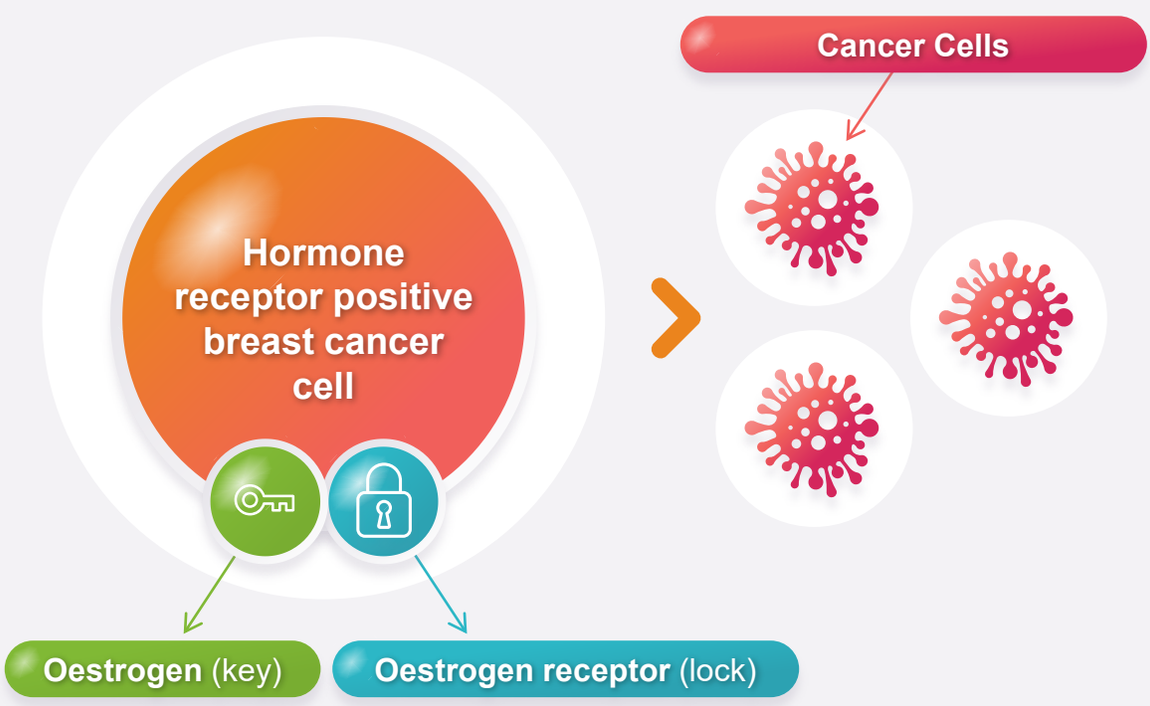
If this contains **hormone receptor positive breast cancer cells**, then the best treatment for you will be **hormone** (**endocrine**) therapy.

How do breast cancer cells grow?

Female sex hormones, such as **oestrogen** and another called **progesterone**, help cancer cells to grow.

In hormone receptor positive breast cancer, there are **proteins** or **receptors** that are sensitive and respond to these hormones.

Think of an **oestrogen receptor** rather like a **lock**, and **oestrogen** like a **key**. If the **key** meets the **lock**, it will **stimulate** that cell to grow.



If oestrogen attaches to its receptor, it stimulates cancer cells to grow.

We do not want breast cancer cells to be stimulated and grow so we change that by giving patients **hormone (endocrine) treatment**.

Types of hormone (endocrine) treatments

There are different types of hormone (endocrine) treatments. These are usually given as tablets taken each day. They work by **reducing** the **amount** of **hormone** that the breast cancer cells get, either by:

Blocking the **hormone** (**key**) reaching the **receptor** (**lock**)

or

stopping the **hormone** (**key**) from being made

or

by **changing** the way the **receptor** (**lock**) works

01 **Selective oestrogen receptor modulators (SERMs)**

> Tamoxifen
> Toremifene

Blocking the **hormone** (**key**) reaching the **receptor** (**lock**)

02 **Aromatase inhibitors (Ais)**

> Anastrozole
> Letrozole

Stopping the **hormone** (**key**) from being made

03 **Selective oestrogen receptor degraders (SERDs)**

> Fulvestrant (injection)
> Giredestrant (oral tablet)

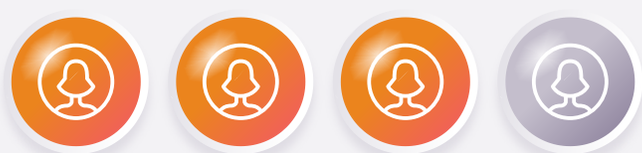
Changing the way the **receptor** (**lock**) works

This prevents the cancer cells from getting the fuel they need to grow and multiply.

Why it is important to take the tablets

It is **important to take the hormone tablets daily** to help reduce the risk of the cancer returning. It is best to swallow them whole with a glass of water. They can be taken in the morning or at night with or just after food.

The important thing is to **develop a regular routine** that fits in with your lifestyle.



3 in 4 women find it a challenge to take the tablets regularly

Taking the tablets **every day for at least 5 years** or more **can prevent the cancer from coming back**.

If stopped or not taken regularly, there is a greater risk that breast cancer will **recur or return**, and this may affect survival.

This booklet provides some general guidance and advice to help patients like you to keep taking the **hormone (endocrine) tablets** regularly.

You may prefer to watch a short **patient information film** (scan **QR code** shown below) for more details on how best to manage the side effects.

What are the treatment side effects?

Like all medications, hormone therapy can cause certain **side effects**, which may be why some women do not take them regularly.

It is always difficult to predict who might experience side effects, but care is taken to monitor them, as **research has shown** there are **many things** to offer that might **help**.

Some common side effects are:

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Joint stiffness/pain
- Vaginal dryness
- Mood swings
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances

There are also **rare** but **serious** side effects to consider, such as:

- Blood clots
- Womb cancer
- Bone fractures

The normal menstrual cycle might be disrupted, and fertility altered in **premenopausal** women.

Hormone tablets are a **very important** part of your breast cancer treatment and must be taken regularly to work well. So, if you experience side effects that **persist** or are **bothersome**, please talk to your health care team as they may be able to alter the dose or type of treatment.

Common side effects

Hot flushes & night sweats

Hot flushes and night sweats are sudden changes in body temperature. You might feel hot and sweaty or get a red face. Some people wake up soaked in perspiration.

You may be offered different **medications** (see table below) to help reduce hot flushes. It is important to discuss with your doctor the **benefits** and possible **risks** of taking these medications.

Not everyone finds them suitable so there are other things to try.

Medications	Reduce frequency and severity of hot flushes by up to:	Potential side effects
Anticonvulsants (gabapentin, pregabalin)	70 / 100	Dry mouth, dry eyes, nausea, headaches
Antidepressants (venlafaxine, paroxetine, fluoxetine)	60 / 100	Nausea, diarrhoea, headache
Antihypertensive (clonidine)	40 / 100	Nausea, diarrhoea, headache
Bladder muscle relaxant (oxybutynin)	40 / 100	Dry mouth, dizziness, insomnia

Other things to try

Some people find that certain **supplements** may reduce hot flushes. These include **evening primrose oil**, **soy**, **black cohosh**, **vitamin E**, and **sage**. But there is not much research evidence that they help. Also, some supplements may make the hormone therapy work less well.

Below are some helpful tips on how to stay cool and dry:

- **Keep your bedroom temperature cool** use cotton bedsheets, a cool "chill" pillow, a fan.
- **Avoid alcohol and drinks containing caffeine.**
- **Exercise regularly**. Doing yoga helped reduce the number of hot flushes by nearly one-third.
- **Watch your diet** and try to lose weight if you need to.
- These things all help but the **best research evidence for reducing hot flushes and night sweats is for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).**
- A **CBT therapist** will help you think differently about your hot flushes and sweats.
  - You will learn to value your own qualities and strengths and how to manage negative thoughts about yourself.
  - They will teach you a simple, slow breathing exercise that calms your physical and emotional reaction to stress, and helps you relax.
  - **CBT** can reduce the bother women experience from hot flushes by two-thirds.

Sleep difficulties

Sleep problems may be due to stress, worry, anxiety, pain, or hot flushes. You need to develop good habits to sleep well such as:

- **Regular bedtime.** Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day to get into a routine.
- **Remove electronic devices** like phones or laptops from your bedroom.
- **Avoid** caffeinated drinks before bed.
- **Avoid** exercising right before bedtime.
- **Consider trying CBT for insomnia**. This can change your thought pattern to help you to sleep better.

In the short term your doctor may prescribe sleeping tablets to help, but of course these also have side effects.

Mood swings

It is normal to feel emotional and upset when diagnosed with breast cancer and having treatment.

Some people with a history of anxiety or depression are more likely to experience mood swings during breast cancer treatment.

What may help

Try to remove the known causes

These include the worry caused by side effects such as hot flushes and night sweats.

Talk to your doctor or specialist nurse about any concerns you have. They may be able to refer you for counselling, CBT or prescribe other medication to help.

Fatigue

Some people feel low in energy, weak and tired or **fatigued** even after a good night's sleep and rest.

Beating fatigue

Find and try to remove the causes of your tiredness, perhaps the night sweats are disturbing your sleep, or you feel worried or anxious.

Know your limits and take time to rest when you need to. Wait for the fatigue to pass.

Try doing gentle exercise that you enjoy. Up to 9 out of 10 people found yoga or aerobic exercise (exercise that gets your heart pumping) helped reduce the feelings of fatigue.

Consider trying CBT. 8 out of 10 people reported that CBT helps to relieve their fatigue.

Joint stiffness

As we age, we may get joint pain and stiffness from arthritis. Some women may experience **joint pains** while taking hormone treatment.

Unlike arthritis, the pain **does not cause lasting damage to the joints**. Typically, the stiffness, discomfort, and aching happen in the smaller joints like the wrists, and ankles, especially after a long period of sitting or sleeping.

How to ease pain and discomfort

Exercise from activities you enjoy including yoga, cycling, swimming, golf, tennis or just walking have been shown to improve pain, stiffness, and mood.

Being overweight can make joint pains worse so try to maintain a healthy diet.

Acupuncture may help some people.
You will notice if it is useful for you after just a few sessions.

Joint stiffness *(cont'd)*

Other things for joint pain

Certain medications such as **anti-inflammatory drugs** and **antidepressants** are commonly used to reduce joint pains, but they may have side effects (see table below).

Medications	Benefits	Potential drawbacks
Anti-inflammatory drug (ibuprofen, paracetamol)	**Reduces pain**	Headaches, sickness, stomach irritation or bleeding
Antidepressants (duloxetine)	**Reduces pain**	Diarrhoea, drowsiness, fatigue, high blood pressure
Acupuncture	**Reduces pain**	Expensive
Cannabis oil	**Help some people**	No evidence
Vitamin D	**Unlikely to be harmful**	No evidence
Yoga	**Improve quality of life**	Nonadherence
Exercise	**Improve mental health and quality of life**	Nonadherence

There is no reliable evidence to suggest that cannabis oil or vitamin D is helpful.

Sometimes the **joint pain lessens within a few months** of starting hormone treatment. If the pain continues to bother you, tell your health care team who may be able to prescribe a different type of hormone treatment.

Sexual problems

During cancer treatment, some women may experience gynaecological and sexual problems like vaginal dryness or discharge, pain during sex, or loss of interest.

These can affect your quality of life and relationships.

Treating sexual problems

- **Use a lubricant** like pH-neutral gel, water-based vaginal moisturiser to reduce dryness and pain.
- Please discuss with your doctor before using **vaginal oestrogen** preparations as their **potential risks** to women with hormone receptor positive breast cancer are still unclear.
- **Do not use any perfumed soaps or douches** in your vagina, as these can cause irritation.
- **Talk to your medical team** about sexual issues as they are trained to give advice on this topic.
- **Consider trying CBT to help** as it has been shown to have a positive effect on sexual functioning and body image in breast cancer survivors.

Summary

- **Hormone treatment** reduces the risk of breast cancer returning but **must be taken regularly**.
- Each person responds differently to hormone treatment.
- Many of the common side effects are temporary and are less troublesome after a few months, especially if patients try some of the suggestions in this booklet.
- Remember if you **continue to have symptoms** that tempt you into **reducing** your hormone treatment or **stopping** altogether, **please talk to your doctor**.
- They can suggest ways to help you including switching to a different type of hormone therapy.

Managing side effects of hormone treatments for breast cancer

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References for further information

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Patient information film QR code

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