

# DRUG THERAPY: AROMASIN



## Aromasin (exemestane)

This factsheet explains what Aromasin 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.

### What is Aromasin?

Aromasin is a drug used to treat breast cancer in postmenopausal women (women who no longer have their periods). This type of hormone treatment is called an aromatase inhibitor.

### How does Aromasin work?

Many breast cancers are encouraged to grow by the female sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone. These breast cancers are called hormone sensitive or hormone receptor positive and Aromasin blocks the effects of these

hormones. With less oestrogen getting to the cancer cells they grow more slowly or stop growing altogether.

When you reach the menopause (stop having periods), you no longer make oestrogen in your ovaries. But it is made in small amounts by turning other sex hormones called androgens into oestrogen.

Androgens are made in your adrenal glands which are small glands, above your kidneys. Aromatase is the enzyme which changes androgens into oestrogen and aromatase inhibitors stop this happening. This change happens mostly in fatty tissue, muscle and your skin.

National Cancer Helpline: 1800 200 700





## When is Aromasin prescribed?

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Aromasin will only be prescribed if your breast cancer grows with the help of oestrogen. This is called oestrogen receptor positive. It is only suitable for you if you have been through the menopause.

Aromasin 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**

Aromasin can be prescribed for postmenopausal women with early breast cancer. This is called adjuvant therapy.

Aromasin may also be prescribed as a further treatment after 5 years of Tamoxifen. This is known as extended adjuvant therapy. In this case Aromasin treatment should begin within 3 months of completing Tamoxifen therapy.

### **Advanced breast cancer**

Aromasin may be prescribed if your breast cancer comes back or progresses while you are taking Tamoxifen or other hormone treatments. In this situation you will usually take the drug for as long as your breast cancer remains under control. If your breast cancer does progress while you are taking Aromasin, there are other treatments that may be effective for you.

## How is Aromasin taken?

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Aromasin comes as a tablet (25mg) that you take once a day, preferably after a meal. It is best to take it at the same time each day. If you miss a dose you don't need to take a replacement dose as the drug will remain in your system from the previous day. Store Aromasin tablets out of the reach of children, at room temperature, away from heat and light and moisture.

## How long will I have to take Aromasin?

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This will vary from person to person. Your specialist will discuss with you how long you need to take Aromasin for, as it can vary. For most patients it is given for 5 years. It may also be given after 2–3 years of Tamoxifen, as studies have shown that switching may be better for some women. If for any reason you want to stop taking Aromasin, it is important to talk to your specialist first.

## What are the side-effects of Aromasin?

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Everyone reacts to drugs differently and some people experience more side-effects than others. The known side-effects of Aromasin are listed below. Remember that you may not get any of these. If you experience any side-effects that you

are concerned about, talk to your specialist or breast care nurse.

### Common side-effects:

- **Menopausal symptoms.** You may have menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and increased sweating. You may also notice vaginal dryness. Vaginal moisturisers or lubricants can be helpful and are available without prescription from your pharmacy. You can do practical things to help yourself such as wearing cotton clothing and reducing your intake of caffeine and alcohol. Some women find complementary therapies such as acupuncture and reflexology helpful. For further information, see our factsheet *Understanding and Managing Menopausal Symptoms* and our booklet *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*.
- **Feeling sick.** You may have symptoms such as nausea and vomiting which can sometimes be helped by taking your tablet with food. If the symptoms don't improve, talk to your specialist as there are other ways of controlling these side-effects.
- **Feeling tired and headaches.** Another common side-effect is tiredness. It is important to get enough rest. Tell your doctor about any headaches. Please call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for a copy of our booklet *Coping with Fatigue*.
- **Difficulty sleeping.** Some women find that it takes longer to get to sleep. Natural remedies can help with this. For example, lavender oil on your pillow, taking a warm bath before bedtime or having a hot milky drink before bed. Relaxation or mediation tapes or CDs can also encourage restful sleep.
- **Abdominal pain and diarrhoea or constipation.** A very small number of women have diarrhoea or constipation. If you have these problems, discuss with your doctor.
- **Joint pain and muscle aches.** Some women have aching or pain in their muscles and joints. Exercise and massage can be helpful. Tell your doctor as painkillers can be prescribed.

- **Risk of osteoporosis.** Aromatase inhibitors may cause osteoporosis (bone thinning) when taken for a long period. As a result, your specialist may wish to check your bone density (strength and thickness) and you may be started on calcium and vitamin D supplements.
- **Hair thinning.** Some women notice that their hair becomes thinner while taking Aromasin. But it usually regrows when treatment has finished.

## Can I take Aromasin with other drugs?

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Aromasin may interact with other medications. It is best not to take other drugs containing oestrogen, such as the contraceptive pill or HRT, while you are taking Aromasin. Other drugs that can affect Aromasin are the anti-TB drug, rifampicin, the anticonvulsants, phenytoin sodium and carbamazepine, and the herbal remedy, St John's wort. Please tell your doctor that you are being treated with Aromasin if you are prescribed any new medications.

## Further support

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If you have any concerns about taking Aromasin you can talk to your specialist or breast care nurse. You might also find it easier to share your feelings with someone who has had a similar experience to you. Reach to Recovery is a programme set up to help and support women who have recently had a breast cancer diagnosis.

The programme works on the principle of personal contact between you and a Reach to Recovery volunteer – a woman who has had treatment for breast cancer. Carefully selected and fully trained volunteers are available to provide advice and reassurance at a time when you need them most. For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

# CANCER INFORMATION FACTSHEET

## Useful organisations

### Reach to Recovery

43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4  
National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700  
Email: [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie)  
Website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

### American Cancer Society

Website: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

### Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute

Website: [www.indi.ie](http://www.indi.ie)



## FURTHER INFORMATION

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

**1800 200 700**

(Monday–Thursday, 9am–7pm; Friday, 9am–5pm)  
or email [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie)

### Irish Cancer Society

43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4  
Tel: (01) 231 0500  
Fax: (01) 231 0555  
Email: [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie)  
Website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

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