

Here's your detailed guide on tamoxifen



Tamoxifen

Tamoxifen is an anti-oestrogen drug. It stops oestrogen attaching to breast cancer cells and making them grow. Tamoxifen is used to treat oestrogen receptor (ER+) positive breast cancer in both premenopausal and postmenopausal women. It can also be taken by men who have oestrogen receptor (ER+) positive breast cancer.

What are the possible side effects of tamoxifen?

Like all medications, tamoxifen can cause side effects, however, it is important to know that everyone reacts differently to medicines. Some people will have more side effects than others. Most side effects can be managed and often improve as your body gets used to the new medication.

Common side effects of tamoxifen

Menopausal symptoms such as:

Hot flushes

Hot flushes are a common side effect of taking tamoxifen. They can vary in their intensity and frequency (from feeling warm to experiencing intense heat on the upper body and face).

Night sweats and sleep disturbance

In addition to hot flushes, night sweats can also be a common side effect of taking tamoxifen impacting on sleep, mood and concentration.

Headaches

Headaches can be a common side effect of taking tamoxifen.

TIP

If you experience headaches, tell your specialist team, GP, or community pharmacist, they can give you advice about pain relief that may help.

IMPORTANT

If your headaches don't improve, or they get worse, tell your specialist team or GP.

Mood changes and depression

Mood changes can include irritability, restlessness, anxiety and fears, and concentration problems.

Tamoxifen can also cause depression (low mood): feeling miserable and sad, lack of enjoyment, and loss of interest in life.

IMPORTANT

Tamoxifen, in a very small percentage of women can induce suicidal thoughts (those who might be particularly sensitive to estrogen-suppression effects on mood). If YOU are feeling very low in mood or suicidal, stop tamoxifen IMMEDIATELY and seek help.

Fatigue (extreme feeling of tiredness)

Persistent tiredness (fatigue) that doesn't go away with rest or sleep is a common menopausal symptom and side effect of taking tamoxifen.

Nausea (feeling sick) / indigestion

Nausea and indigestion are common side effects of taking tamoxifen. For some people feeling sick is usually experienced when first starting to take tamoxifen and usually settles over time.

TIP

Taking tamoxifen with food or taking it at a different time of day can help.

Fluid retention / oedema (fluid build-up)

Fluid buildup / feeling bloated is a common side effect of taking tamoxifen and may affect your weight, although there is no clear evidence that tamoxifen is associated with weight gain.

The most common type of fluid buildup / oedema that can occur for people taking tamoxifen is around the eyes (particularly in the mornings). Swelling can also occur in the ankles, feet and lower legs – Swelling usually improves over time.

TIP

To help manage mild to moderate fluid retention:

- Avoid salty or processed foods that can contribute to fluid retention.
- Elevate the head whilst sleeping to help with eye swelling.
- Elevate the swollen area.
- Avoid sitting and standing for long periods of time.

Vaginal irritation such as dryness and itching

Vaginal irritation can include dryness and itching, this may be a mild irritation or can be severe, causing pain, and inhibiting intercourse/sexual function.

Decreased libido (decreased sex desire)

Decreased libido (decreased sexual desire) is a common side effect of taking hormone therapy. Decreased libido is strongly related to physical and vaginal changes (e.g. vaginal dryness and painful intercourse – dyspareunia) and psychosocial effects such as changes in body image and self-esteem.

Other common side effects of tamoxifen

Vaginal discharge

Vaginal discharge that is odourless, clear or white is a common side effect when taking tamoxifen.

TIP

If you are worried about this, let your specialist team or GP know so they can rule out infection.

Effects on periods (irregular or loss of menstrual periods)

If you are still having regular periods, you may find that your periods change when taking tamoxifen: they may become lighter, irregular or stop altogether.

Periods may also change because of other treatments you have had, such as chemotherapy, that has caused an earlier menopause and/or where the menopause has occurred naturally.

IMPORTANT

If your periods are irregular or have stopped while taking tamoxifen, it is important to use contraception to prevent a pregnancy (Tamoxifen may harm a developing baby).

- What types of contraception to use (such as barrier contraception).
- How long should you continue to use contraception for.

Effects on bone health

In post-menopausal women, there is evidence that tamoxifen provides some bone protection, increasing bone density (thickness). This helps to reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

In pre-menopausal women, evidence has shown that tamoxifen may slightly increase the risk of osteoporosis when given in conjunction with treatment to stop the ovaries from working.

Women having ovarian suppression will usually be offered a DEXA scan to measure bone density (bone thickness).

Skin rash

Taking tamoxifen may cause a rash, which may become itchy or dry. Speak to your community pharmacist, GP, or specialist team, they can tell you what the best products are to use on your skin to help.

TIP

If your skin feels dry, try using soap-free cleansers and unperfumed moisturising cream.

Other side effects of tamoxifen

Effects on the womb

If you are still having regular periods, you may find that your periods change when taking tamoxifen: they may become lighter, irregular or stop altogether.

Periods may also change because of other treatments you have had, such as chemotherapy, that has caused an earlier menopause and/or where the menopause has occurred naturally.

IMPORTANT

If you experience irregular or unexpectant bleeding or discharge from the vagina tell your specialist team or GP. They will arrange for tests to be done to check for changes to the lining of the womb.

Change to hair or facial hair

Some women will experience hair thinning or some hair loss when taking tamoxifen and a small number of women will notice an increase in downy facial hair.

Changes to vision / eye problems

Although this is not a common side effect, for some people, taking tamoxifen it can cause eye problems, such as dryness, irritation and cataracts (clouding of the lens of the eye).

IMPORTANT

If you experience any eye problems speak to your specialist team or GP, they will be able to recommend a number of strategies to help manage your symptoms and will also advise when it may be necessary to see an eye specialist (ophthalmologist).

Effects on the liver

Sometimes, when taking tamoxifen, it can cause changes to your liver, such as your liver enzymes (which can be seen in blood tests) or fatty deposits in the liver.

These changes are usually mild and unlikely to affect how your liver works. Your specialist team or GP will request blood tests to check how well your liver is working.