

DRUG THERAPY: LETROZOLE (FEMARA®)



Letrozole (Femara®)

This factsheet is about a drug used to treat breast cancer called letrozole, which is also called Femara®. It explains what letrozole 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 letrozole?

Letrozole 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 letrozole work?

Hormones exist naturally in your body. They help to control the growth and activity of normal cells.

Hormones, particularly oestrogen, can encourage some breast cancer cells to grow. This type of breast cancer is known as oestrogen-receptor positive. You may also see this written as ER positive. Letrozole works by lowering the amount of oestrogen in the body. As less oestrogen reaches the cancer cells, they grow more slowly or stop growing altogether.



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When you reach the menopause (stop having periods), you no longer make oestrogen in your ovaries. But you still make small amounts of it in other parts of your body. For example, fatty tissue. This happens when other hormones are turned into oestrogen by an enzyme called aromatase. Letrozole works by stopping this process from taking place so that there is less oestrogen in the body. The aim of treatment with letrozole is to reduce the risk of your breast cancer coming back.

When is letrozole prescribed?

Letrozole 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.

Letrozole 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

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

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

Sometimes letrozole may be prescribed for early primary breast cancer to reduce the size of the tumour before surgery. This is called neo-adjuvant treatment.

Advanced breast cancer

Letrozole may be prescribed if your breast cancer comes back or progresses while you are taking tamoxifen or other hormone treatments. In this case, 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 letrozole, there are other treatments that may be offered to you.

How is letrozole taken?

Letrozole comes as a tablet (2.5mg) that you take once a day. It is best to take it at the same time every day. If you miss a dose you don't need to take an extra dose the next day as the level of drug in your body will remain high from the previous day. It is important not to stop taking letrozole without talking to your specialist first. If the drug causes nausea, or stomach upset, it can be taken with food or at bedtime.

How long will I have to take letrozole?

This will vary from person to person. Your specialist will discuss with you how long you need to take letrozole for, as it can vary. For many patients it is given for 5 years.

What are the side-effects of letrozole?

Everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people may experience more side-effects than others. Usually letrozole causes only a few side-effects that can be kept under control. It is rare for someone to stop taking letrozole because of the side-effects. The known side-effects of letrozole are listed below. It is important to remember that you may not get any of these.

Possible side-effects:

- **Menopausal symptoms:** Hot flushes and night sweats are common but tend to be mild and usually improve over time. 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 free copies of our factsheet, *Understanding and Managing Menopausal Symptoms*, and our booklet, *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

- **Joint pain and muscle aches:** Some women have aching or pain in their muscles and joints. Exercise and massage can often be helpful. Tell your doctor as painkillers can be prescribed.
- **Nausea and vomiting:** Loss of appetite or nausea can occur in some people. Often this can be relieved by taking letrozole at a different time or by taking your tablet with food. These symptoms tend to be mild and temporary.

- **Tiredness and headaches:** Some people complain of tiredness and fatigue. Remember it is important to get enough rest. Let your doctor know about any headaches. For a free copy of our booklet *Coping with Fatigue*, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.
- **Hair thinning:** You might notice that your hair becomes thinner while taking letrozole. But it is not usually noticeable to other people.
- **Risk of osteoporosis:** Aromatase inhibitors may cause osteoporosis when taken for a long period. As a result, your specialist may wish to check your bone density (strength and thickness) with a scan before taking letrozole and during the treatment. To keep your bones healthy, you can increase your intake of calcium and vitamin D. You may also be prescribed a calcium and vitamin D supplement. Regular weight bearing exercise and stopping smoking will also help keep your bones strong.

Other less common side-effects include perspiration, constipation and feeling in a low mood. Weight gain may also occur in some women.

If you get a side-effect that does not improve over time, talk to your specialist.

Can I take letrozole with other drugs?

It is best not to take other drugs containing oestrogen, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT), while you are taking letrozole. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist about the safety of taking other medicines, vitamins or herbal supplements. It is generally not advised to take supplements containing phytoestrogens with letrozole. These are plant-based oestrogens.

CANCER INFORMATION FACTSHEET

Further support

If you have any concerns about taking letrozole, 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

Useful organisations

Reach to Recovery

Provides practical and emotional support to women with breast cancer.

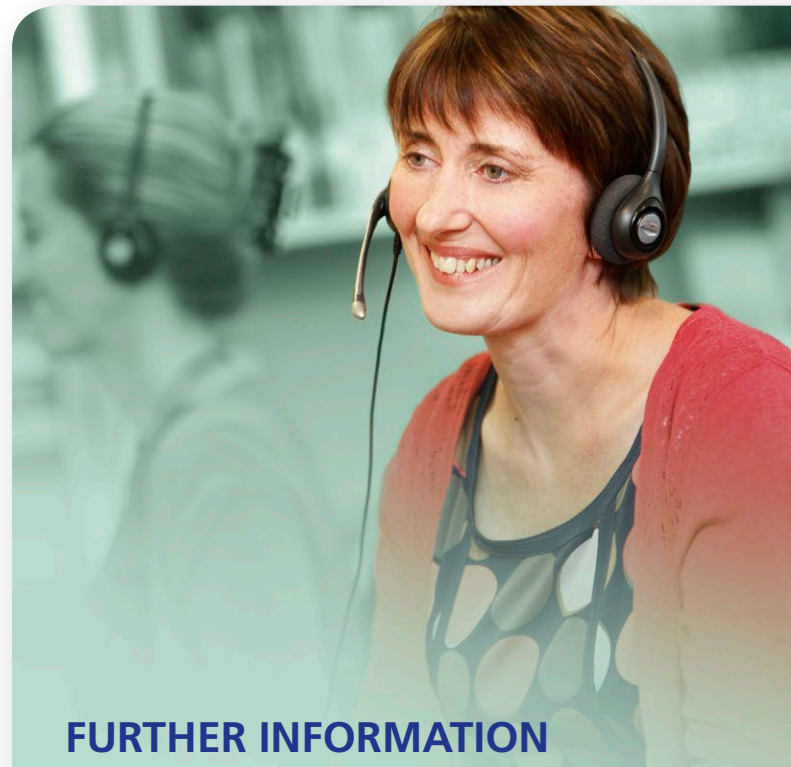
43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4
National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
Website: www.cancer.ie

Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute

Website: www.indi.ie

Irish Osteoporosis Society

Website: www.osteoporosis.ie



FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on letrozole and breast cancer 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

Irish Cancer Society

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