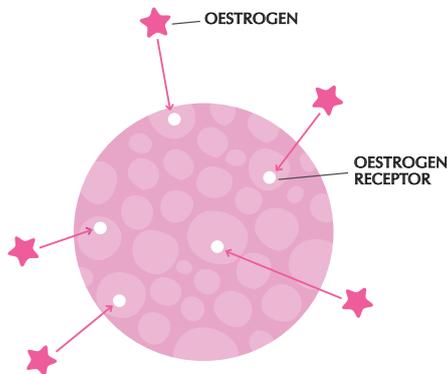
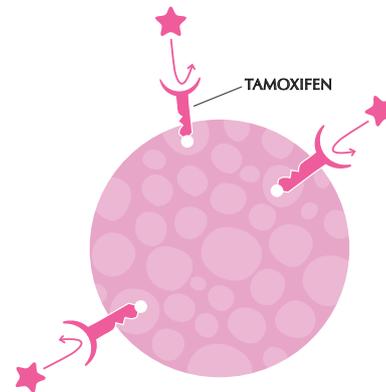


## What is tamoxifen and how does it work?

Some breast cancers require oestrogen to grow and these cancers are known as 'oestrogen receptor positive' (ER+). Oestrogen attaches to receptors in breast cancer cells, enabling the cancer cell to grow and multiply. Tamoxifen blocks oestrogen by attaching to the oestrogen receptors much like a key in a lock.



Cancer cells stimulated by oestrogen



Tamoxifen 'locks' the receptor preventing oestrogen attaching to it

## Why do I need to take tamoxifen?

- Because your breast cancer is ER+.
- Because tamoxifen reduces the risk of death from breast cancer, lowers breast cancer recurrence rates and reduces the risk of developing a new cancer in the other breast.

Tamoxifen can also be used to control cancer that has spread to other parts of the body (secondary or metastatic breast cancer) and occasionally tamoxifen is used when surgery is not appropriate.

## How long will I have to take tamoxifen?

- You will usually take tamoxifen for 5 - 10 years.
- Some women may take tamoxifen for 2- 3 years and then switch to another type of hormone therapy known as an aromatase inhibitor.
- In metastatic breast cancer, the time you take tamoxifen will vary.

## How do I take tamoxifen?

Tamoxifen is a tablet taken daily by mouth, at a similar time each day.

- If you miss a dose, you should not take an extra tablet the next day.
- If you are not taking tamoxifen every day or decide to stop, please contact your nurse specialist or doctor, as this will affect the success of your treatment.
- It is important to contact your GP to get a new prescription every three months.

## Can I take tamoxifen with other medications?

Tamoxifen can interact with other medications (such as some antidepressants and warfarin) and herbal medicines or supplements. Please discuss all of your other medications with your nurse specialist or doctor.

Always tell any other doctor, dentist or pharmacist who is treating you, that you are taking tamoxifen.

## What are the possible side effects of tamoxifen?

As tamoxifen blocks oestrogen from attaching to its receptors, oestrogen is unable to work in the body in its usual way. Therefore you may experience symptoms that are both physical and emotional when taking tamoxifen. These symptoms are usually not severe; however, for some people they can be distressing and disruptive to daily life.

Everyone reacts differently to drugs so side effects will vary from person to person. It is unlikely that an individual would experience all of the side effects listed here. Your nurse specialist or doctor will help you to manage these symptoms and will advise you on strategies to minimize them.

## Common side effects

### Hot flushes and night sweats

Hot flushes can occur occasionally or several times an hour and can feel like a wave of warmth through the body. In extreme cases they may be drenching sweats. Hot flushes can also occur at night. They may lessen after the first few months although for some people they will continue for the duration of treatment.

#### To reduce hot flushes try:

- Reducing your intake of alcohol, nicotine, spicy food or drinks containing caffeine.
- Maintaining a healthy weight and regularly exercising for a minimum of two hours per week.
- Minimising stress. Deep breathing can help you to relax.
- Yoga, meditation and relaxation techniques.
- Wearing cotton clothing and layers that can be taken off during a flush.

# Tamoxifen continued



## Vaginal effects

Reduced oestrogen can cause vaginal discharge, pain, bleeding, itching and dryness, and loss of libido (sex drive).

- Non-hormonal vaginal moisturisers like Replens™ or Sylk (available from a pharmacist) can help to reduce dryness, itch and discomfort especially during sex.
- Avoid using petroleum or oil-based lubricants as these can worsen vaginal dryness.
- Loss of libido can be complex to manage. Counselling may be beneficial and your nurse specialist can refer you for this.

## Mood swings

Reduced oestrogen can cause changes in mood. You may feel low, anxious, forgetful and experience reduced concentration.

- Relaxation, exercise, support groups and counselling can be helpful.
- Please contact your nurse specialist or doctor if you are concerned about mood changes.

## Change in periods

- If you are still having periods, you may notice changes. They may become lighter, heavier, irregular or stop altogether.
- If your periods stop on tamoxifen, please discuss with your doctor. This may be caused by tamoxifen but remember, it is possible to become pregnant while taking tamoxifen.

## Nausea/indigestion

- Feelings of sickness usually improve after a few weeks as your body adjusts to tamoxifen. Taking your tablet with food or at night may help.

## Tiredness, headaches, dizziness, cataracts, leg cramps, skin rashes, hair thinning

These are less common side effects of tamoxifen. Please contact your nurse specialist if you experience these or any other symptoms that are of concern to you.

## Contraception and fertility

You must not take tamoxifen if you are pregnant or breastfeeding as it may harm a developing baby. It is important to use an effective, non-hormonal form of contraception while taking tamoxifen and for a few months afterwards.

## Uncommon but important side effects

### Increased risk of blood clots

- Let your nurse specialist or doctor know if you have a history of blood clots such as deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or pulmonary embolus.
- Tell your doctor immediately if you experience swelling, redness or pain in your leg or sudden onset of breathlessness.
- The risk of blood clots or DVT increases after periods of prolonged inactivity. If you are scheduled for surgery or have an illness that will reduce your mobility, tell your nurse specialist or doctor so that they can advise you of any changes required to your tamoxifen treatment. Try not to stay immobile for long periods while travelling.

### Increased risk of endometrial cancer (cancer of the uterus or womb)

- There is a very small potential risk for developing endometrial cancer from tamoxifen. However, the benefit of treating your breast cancer with tamoxifen outweighs this risk.
- If you have abnormal vaginal bleeding or pelvic pain, contact your nurse specialist or doctor.

In post-menopausal women, tamoxifen maintains bone density and also lowers cholesterol levels.

Men who take tamoxifen may also experience some of these listed side effects such as hot flushes, nausea, weight gain, mood changes, reduced libido and increased risk of blood clots.

Talk with your nurse specialist or doctor about any side effects you may be having. There may be ways to reduce the intensity of your symptoms. Tamoxifen has been shown to improve breast cancer survival and your specialist team will work with you and support you in taking hormonal therapy as prescribed so that you will gain the maximum benefit.

## Who to contact

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## The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation

For more resources and information contact us:

Freephone: 0800 902 732

Email: [breasthealth@bcf.org.nz](mailto:breasthealth@bcf.org.nz)

[www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz](http://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz)

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[www.mybc.care](http://www.mybc.care) (online community)

 **ADVICE LINE:**

**0800 BCNurse**

(0800 2268 773)