

## Exemestane

This leaflet is offered as a guide to you and your family. The possible benefits of treatment vary; for some people hormonal therapy may reduce the risk of cancer coming back, for others it may control the cancer and its symptoms. Your doctor will explain to you whether you will receive chemotherapy or another type of treatment or a combination of both. Your doctor or nurse will be happy to answer any questions you have about your treatment.

### Your treatment

Your doctor or nurse clinician has prescribed for you a treatment which includes the hormonal therapy exemestane.

**Treatment: Exemestane 25mg tablet taken ONCE a day continuously until your doctor tells you otherwise. Take it after food. Try to take it at the same time each day, morning or evening.**

You may take exemestane after surgery and with other treatments to reduce the risk of breast cancer coming back. You will usually take it for a few years. Doctors sometimes prescribe it before or after you have another type of hormonal therapy drug - to control breast cancer that has spread to other parts of the body (secondary breast cancer).

This treatment can have serious or possibly life-threatening side effects. It is very important that you report side effects straight away. Don't delay, if you feel unwell, please ring The Christie Hotline on **0161 446 3658**. The lines are open 24 hours a day.

Hormones are substances produced naturally in the body. They act as chemical messengers and help control the activity of cells and organs. Hormonal therapies are drugs that interfere with the way hormones are made or how they work in the body.

Many breast cancers rely on the hormone oestrogen to grow. This type of breast cancer is called oestrogen receptor-positive (ER positive) breast cancer.

In women, after the menopause, oestrogen is no longer made in the ovaries. Instead it is made in the fatty tissues of the body. This happens when an enzyme (a type of protein) called aromatase changes other hormones into oestrogen. Exemestane is a type of drug called an aromatase inhibitor. It blocks (inhibits) the activity of aromatase and reduces the amount of oestrogen in the body.

**If you feel unwell, you have symptoms of an infection or your temperature is 37.5°C or above, or below 36°C contact The Christie Hotline straight away**



## Possible side effects

Hormonal therapy can cause different side effects. Some are more likely to occur than others. Everyone is different and not everyone gets all the side effects. Most side effects are usually temporary, but in some rare cases they can be life-threatening. It is important to tell your hospital doctor or nurse about any side effects so they can be monitored, and where possible, treated.

## Common side effects (more than 1 in 10)

- **Hot flushes**

Hot flushes and sweats may occur but do lessen after the first few months. Cutting down on nicotine, alcohol and hot drinks containing caffeine, such as tea and coffee can help. Dress in layers, so you can remove clothes as needed. Natural fabrics, such as cotton may feel more comfortable. If hot flushes are a problem, tell your doctor. Low doses of certain antidepressant drugs can help to reduce flushes.

- **Joint and muscle pain**

You may have pain and stiffness in your joints, and sometimes in your muscles while taking exemestane. Let your doctor or nurse know if this happens. They can prescribe painkillers and give you advice. Being physically active and maintaining a healthy weight can help reduce joint pain and keep them flexible.

- **Sickness and diarrhoea**

Any sickness is usually mild, but let your doctor know if this happens. Exemestane may also cause indigestion or tummy pain. Let them know if you have any of these symptoms. They can prescribe drugs to help.

If diarrhoea becomes a problem during or after your treatment, anti-diarrhoeal tablets can be prescribed by your doctor. Ask the staff for a copy of the booklet 'Eating: help yourself' which has some useful ideas about diet when you are having treatment.

- **Fatigue**

You may feel tired, sleepy or feel like you have no energy when you start taking exemestane. Try to pace yourself until this improves. It's important to get the right balance of having enough rest and being physically active. Regular short walks will help you to feel less tired. If you feel sleepy, don't drive or operate machinery.

- **Headaches and dizziness**

If you have headaches, let your doctor or nurses know. They can usually be controlled with painkillers you can buy yourself. Exemestane may cause dizziness. Let your doctor or nurse know if this is a problem.

- **Insomnia and mood changes**

Some people may have problems concentrating, feel anxious or have difficulty sleeping while taking exemestane. If you have trouble getting to sleep, try having a warm bath or a hot milky drink before bed. Relaxation techniques, tapes or CDs can also help. Some people may feel low in mood or become depressed while taking exemestane. Talk to your nurse or doctor if this happens. They can suggest ways to help with this.

- **Hair thinning**

Your hair may become thinner while taking exemestane. This is usually mild. Your hair will get thicker after treatment finishes.

- **Appetite decrease**

If you don't have much appetite, try eating small, frequent meals or snacks. If problems with eating don't get better, talk to your doctor or nurse. Some women find their appetite increases. Eating healthily and being physically active will help if you have concerns about your weight.

- **Liver function changes**

Exemestane may cause changes in the way your liver works. You are very unlikely to notice any changes. Your doctor will take regular blood samples to check your liver is working properly. Rarely, exemestane causes inflammation of the liver (hepatitis). Tell your doctor straightaway if the whites of your eyes or your skin turn yellow, or if you become unwell with itching, or pain on the right side of your tummy.

## Uncommon side effects (less than 1 in 10)

- **Pain, numbness and tingling in hands and fingers**

These symptoms may be due to carpal tunnel syndrome which is caused by pressure on a nerve in the wrist. It is more common in people taking exemestane. Tell your doctor if you have these symptoms.

- **Skin rash and dry skin**

You may get a mild skin rash. Tell your doctor or nurse if this happens. **It is very important to contact your doctor straightaway if you get a severe skin rash.**

- **Bone fracture**

Taking exemestane for a few years increases your risk of bone thinning, called osteoporosis. This can increase your risk of a broken bone (fracture). You will usually have a bone density scan to check your bone health before and during treatment. If you are at risk of osteoporosis, your doctor may prescribe drugs called bisphosphonates to protect your bones. They will also usually advise you to take calcium and vitamin D supplements. Regular walking, eating a healthy diet, not smoking and sticking to sensible drinking guidelines will also help to strengthen your bones.

- **Fluid retention**

You may put on weight or your ankles and legs may swell because of fluid building up. Tell your doctor or nurse if this happens. If your ankles and legs swell, it can help to put your legs up on a foot stool or cushion.

- **Bruising or bleeding**

This treatment can reduce the production of platelets which help the blood clot. Let your doctor know if you have any unexplained bruising or bleeding such as nosebleeds, bloodspots or rashes on the skin, and bleeding gums.

- **Constipation**

You may become constipated. Try to drink plenty of fluids and eat foods high in fibre. Tell your doctor who may prescribe a suitable laxative. Please contact The Christie Hotline if your constipation lasts more than 3 days or you experience abdominal discomfort.

## Late side effects

Some side effects may become evident only after a number of years. In reaching any decision with you about treatment, the potential benefit you receive from treatment will be weighed against the risks of serious long term side effects to the heart, lungs, kidneys and bone marrow. With some drugs there is also a small but definite risk of developing another cancer. If any of these problems specifically apply to you, the doctor will discuss these with you and note this on your consent form.

## Contacts

If you have any general questions or concerns about your treatment, please ring the area where you are having treatment:

- Administration enquiries    **0161 918 7606/7610**
- Chemotherapy nurse        **0161 918 7171**

**For advice ring The Christie Hotline on 0161 446 3658 (24 hours).**

Your consultant is: .....

Your hospital number is: .....

Your key worker is: .....

Notes:

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

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We try to ensure that all our information given to patients is accurate, balanced and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **patient.information@christie.nhs.uk**

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.

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urgent support and specialist advice  
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Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

