



YOUR DOCTOR HAS RECOMMENDED TAMOXIFEN

Tamoxifen (Nolvadex®) is a medication given in pill form that was produced in 1967. It is used to treat breast cancer in women and men. Tamoxifen is one of the most common endocrine therapy drugs. It has been shown to decrease the chance of recurrence in some early-stage breast cancers and to prevent the development of cancer in the opposite breast. Tamoxifen can also slow or stop the growth of cancer cells in the body.

How does Tamoxifen affect breast cancer?

Tamoxifen is classified as a selective estrogen receptor modulator (SERM) and works as an anti-estrogen. While the hormone estrogen promotes the growth of breast cancer cells, Tamoxifen works by blocking estrogen from attaching to estrogen receptors on these cells. By blocking the estrogen receptors, it is believed that the growth of the breast cancer cells will be halted.

When is Tamoxifen prescribed?

Women who should definitely NOT use Tamoxifen include pregnant women, women planning to become pregnant or women with a history of blood clots or stroke. An informed discussion between a woman and her physician is essential in determining the appropriateness of this treatment option.

How long should a woman take Tamoxifen?

Studies have confirmed that taking adjuvant Tamoxifen for 5-10 years reduces the risk of recurrence of the original breast cancer as well as the risk of developing a second primary cancer in the same or other breast. (Adjuvant treatment is a treatment used to decrease the chances of a recurrence or spread of disease.)

Does Tamoxifen have any other beneficial effects?

Because Tamoxifen acts like estrogen in tissue other than breast tissue, women who take Tamoxifen may derive some of the benefits of estrogen replacement therapy, such as lowered blood cholesterol. Tamoxifen may also increase bone density, which can slow the development of osteoporosis (bone loss) and reduce the incidence of bone fractures.

What are the side effects of Tamoxifen and does everyone experience these?

For women, the side effects of Tamoxifen are similar to some of the symptoms of menopause. Two of the most common side effects are hot flashes and vaginal discharge. The information below does not include all possible side effects, and not all patients who take Tamoxifen will have these symptoms. Always contact Dr. Hailey if you have questions about your personal situation.

Side effects in women may include:

- Hot flashes
- Vaginal discharge
- Vaginal dryness and/or itching
- Irritation of the skin around the vagina
- Irregular menstrual periods
- Headache
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Skin rash
- Fatigue
- Fluid retention and/or weight gain

Side effects in men may include:

- Hot flashes
- Headache
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Skin rash
- Impotence
- Decrease in sexual interest

Will taking Tamoxifen bring on early onset of menopause?

If you are premenopausal and are taking Tamoxifen, you may experience menstrual irregularities, vaginal bleeding or cessation of menstrual periods entirely. Depending on your age your cycle may return during or after completion of your Tamoxifen. Please discuss any concern with Dr. Hailey.

What are some precautions and recommendations I should know when taking this medication?

Tamoxifen may affect fertility, so it is important to use some form of birth control while you are taking this medication. However, do not use oral contraceptives (the "pill") since they may change the effects of Tamoxifen. Alert Dr. Hailey immediately if you think you may have become pregnant while taking this medication.

Are there any other concerns I should be aware of while taking Tamoxifen?

Blood Clots: Women taking Tamoxifen may have a slightly increased risk of developing blood clots in the lungs or large veins. This may be especially true for women undergoing chemotherapy (anti-cancer drugs) while taking Tamoxifen.

Endometrial cancer: Tamoxifen may increase a woman's risk of developing endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus). However, this risk is less or the same as the risk of postmenopausal women taking single-agent estrogen replacement therapy.

Cataracts: Taking Tamoxifen appears to put some women at increased risk for developing cataracts, a clouding of the lens inside the eye. A few patients have also reported eye problems such as corneal scarring or retinal changes.

When should I call my doctor?

Call Dr. Hailey if you have any questions or concerns or if you experience any of the following:

- Inability to eat or to drink fluids for 24 hours
- Uncontrolled vomiting
- Blurry vision
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Calf swelling and/or tenderness
- Vaginal bleeding
- Any other unusual symptoms

Are there other hormonal therapy medications that can prevent breast cancer?

Other drugs are also available for use in postmenopausal patients with advanced breast cancer. Anastrozole (Arimidex®) and letrozole (Femara®) are among a different class of drugs than Tamoxifen called aromatase inhibitors (AIs). Aromatase is an enzyme that helps the body produce estrogen in the fat tissue and adrenal glands. While Tamoxifen blocks estrogen receptors, AIs block the action of aromatase. Another drug, exemestane (Aromasin®), is similar to the AIs (and is often included in discussion of AI's) but is an aromatase inactivator. Instead of blocking the aromatase, aromatase inactivators actually destroy the enzyme. Both Tamoxifen and AIs are only effective for treating cancers that use hormones to help the tumors grow.

References

- Susan G. Komen. Tamoxifen.
- National Cancer Institute. Hormone Therapy for Breast Cancer.

This information is provided by Breast Specialty of Baton Rouge and is not intended to replace medical advice. Please contact us with any questions or issues concerning Tamoxifen.

