



A Teaching Affiliate  
of Harvard Medical School

# Tamoxifen

## Chemotherapy Teaching

The Center for Breast Cancer  
Mass General Cancer Center



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# Center for Breast Cancer

## Topics to Discuss:

- How Tamoxifen works
- How Tamoxifen is taken
- Storage, Handling, and Disposal
- Drug Interactions
- Side Effects & How to Manage
- Supportive Care Resources
- Your Breast Cancer Team
- When to Call
- Important Phone Numbers



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# What is TAMOXIFEN?

- TAMOXIFEN (Nolvadex®) is an oral hormonal therapy used for hormone-sensitive breast cancers.
- It works by blocking estrogen from binding to hormone receptors. This:
  - decreases the chance of breast cancer returning (recurrence)
  - decreases tumor size
  - delays tumors from spreading (progression)
- Your care team will talk with you about how long you will need to take this therapy.
  - It is common to be on therapy for 5-10 years.



## How is it taken?

- TAMOXIFEN is a tablet you take by mouth.
- Take one tablet (20 mg) once daily with or without food at the same time each day.
  - Do not take with grapefruit juice.
- Swallow tablet whole with water. Do not break, chew, or crush your tablet.
- If you miss a dose, skip the dose. Do not take 2 doses at the same time to make up for the missed dose.



# Storing and Handling

- Keep TAMOXIFEN in its original bottle or in a separate pill box – do not mix other medicines into the same pill box.
- Store at room temperature in a dry location away from direct light.
- Keep out of reach from children and pets.
- Wash your hands before and after handling.
  - If someone else will be handling your TAMOXIFEN, have them wear gloves so they do not come into direct contact with the medicine.



# Disposal

- If you have unused TAMOXIFEN, do not throw it in the trash and do not flush it down the sink/toilet.
- You may dispose of this medicine by:
  1. Calling your city or county's trash and recycling service for information on hazardous drug take-back programs in your community.
  2. Bringing unused TAMOXIFEN to MGH and disposing in the blue drug take-back receptacles. One receptacle is located outside of the Main Lobby Yawkey elevators and another is near the retail pharmacy in the Wang building.
  3. Asking your treatment team or pharmacist for more information.



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# TAMOXIFEN has many drug interactions

- Some drugs or supplements should **not** be taken at the same time as other drugs because they can cause side effects or cause the drug to not work well. This is called a drug interaction.
- Some common drug interactions with TAMOXIFEN include:
  - Bupropion (WELLBUTRIN)
  - Fluoxetine (PROZAC)
  - Paroxetine (PAXIL)
  - Warfarin (COUMADIN)
  - St. John's Wort supplements
  - Turmeric supplements
  - Ginseng supplements
  - Grapefruit juice

# TAMOXIFEN has many drug interactions

- Tell your treatment team of all prescription and over-the-counter medications (this includes vitamins and herbal products).
- Talk with your treatment team or pharmacist before starting any new medications or supplements.



# Common Side Effects

- Hot flashes
- Vaginal dryness, itching, or discharge
- Swelling of hands or feet (fluid retention)
- Joint pain
- Irregular or no menstrual periods
- Loss of interest in sex
- Leg cramps
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Nausea

# Rare Side Effects

- Increased risk
  - blood clot, including stroke and DVT
  - endometrial cancer
    - If you are postmenopausal and have vaginal bleeding, please contact your treatment team.

Call your treatment team if you have:

- Fast/irregular heart beats
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Swelling/pain in any part of an arm or leg

# Managing Side Effects: Hot flashes

- Take part in mild, regular exercise.
- Stay in a cool environment and use fans.
- Wear layers that you can remove.
- Avoid/limit caffeine, spicy food, and alcohol, which can worsen hot flashes.
- Daily vitamin E or pure primrose oil may also help.

# Managing Side Effects: Hot flashes

- Tell your treatment team if your hot flashes are bothersome. We may be able to prescribe medicine to help.
- Tell your treatment team before starting any herbal supplements to treat hot flashes. Some supplements should not be taken during and after breast cancer treatment because they can cause harm.

# Managing Side Effects: Vaginal dryness, itching, and discharge

- For vaginal dryness or itching, use a vaginal moisturizer (such as Replens, FeminEase) 2-3 times per week.
  - Use a lubricant during sexual activity (such as K-Y Jelly, Pjur, Elegance)
- For bothersome discharge, wear a mini-pad throughout the day.
- Tell your treatment team if symptoms do not go away. We may prescribe low-dose vaginal estrogen therapy (such as Vagifem/Imvexxy tablet, Femring, Premarin cream).

# Managing Side Effects: Fluid retention or swelling

- Do not stand for long periods of time.
- Keep legs elevated while sitting or lying down.
- Do not eat salty foods.
- Do not wear tight fitting clothing and shoes.
- Monitor weight and weigh yourself daily.

# Sexuality and Birth Control

- It is fine to be sexually active while receiving tamoxifen. However, you should not get pregnant or get someone pregnant while taking tamoxifen. Tamoxifen can harm a developing baby.
  - Use a reliable barrier contraceptive (such as a condom) during treatment and for **at least 2 months after the last dose of tamoxifen.**

# Supportive Care Resources

- Yoga
- Acupuncture / Acupressure
- Massage
- Support groups
- Survivorship programs
- Workshops
- Music therapy
- To learn more about all our of Supportive Care offerings log onto: [cancercenterpx.org](https://cancercenterpx.org)



# Your Breast Cancer Team

- Oncologist
- Nurse Practitioner
- Pharmacist
- Oncology Social Worker
- Practice Nurse
- Infusion Nurse

# When to call?

## *If experiencing:*

- Signs of blood clot or stroke:
  - Fast or irregular heart beats
  - Chest pain
  - Pain in arms, back, neck, or jaw
  - Shortness of Breath
  - Numbness/weakness on one side of body
- New swelling in arms, legs, or face
- Severe mood changes
- Any skin change, rash, or hives



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# Contact Information

- Phone Numbers
  - Boston: 617-726-6500
  - Waltham: 781-487-6100
- Patient Portal:
  - [patientgateway.org](http://patientgateway.org)



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