

Managing side-effects – Other side-effects

Some women experience one or more side-effects from taking hormone therapy, others do not. There is no way to predict who will experience side-effects, and who won't.

It's important not to assume that any unwanted effect you might be experiencing after breast cancer is solely due to hormone therapy. There are a range of possible causes, such as other treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) or medicines. The normal ageing process and the menopause can also account for some symptoms women can experience. So stopping hormone therapy would not necessarily mean symptoms would disappear.

Side-effects can vary in level of intensity and this can change over time; a side-effect may become less frequent or intense or disappear altogether as time goes on. Again, it's not possible to predict whether this will happen to you. **Rather than looking at all the side effects now, you may find it helpful to come back to this page if and when your side effects change.**

The good news is that **there are many things that can help with side-effects.** This section includes information about some of the most common side-effects women can experience, and a range of tips and hints for managing these.

This section includes information on the following topics:

- Problems with memory
- Feeling sick
- Skin changes
- Headaches
- Long-term side-effects of aromatase inhibitors
- Long-term side-effects of tamoxifen

Problems with memory

Some women notice problems with their memory and ability to concentrate when they are having cancer treatment, including taking hormone therapy. This can affect women of all ages. Women who go through the menopause naturally also often experience problems with memory or concentration because of declining oestrogen levels.

Some of the things you might notice are:

- memory loss – forgetting things that you would normally remember
- difficulty finding words such as the names of objects
- difficulty with numbers, such as adding up in your head
- problems with multi-tasking (doing more than one task at a time)
- problems concentrating or focusing on one thing
- difficulty remembering new information
- difficulty following the flow of a conversation
- taking more time and effort to accomplish mental tasks than before
- mental “fog”.

Not all women treated for breast cancer experience problems with memory or concentration. These issues vary from person to person. For many women the changes are very subtle and get better over time. Some studies even suggest that women taking hormone therapy might find their memory or concentration improves, so the effects are very individual.

What causes problems with memory?

You have been prescribed hormone therapy to control levels of oestrogen in your body. These changes in levels of oestrogen can also have an effect on the brain. This is because oestrogen contributes to language skills, attention, mood, memory and other brain processes.

However, lots of other things can affect your memory and ability to concentrate. Some over-the-counter and prescription medications can also affect memory and concentration, including steroids, anti-depressants, sleeping pills, and pain medication.

"I recently discovered that Gabapentin is known to cause problems with short-term memory, focus and concentration and weight gain; I happened upon a forum where hundreds of people described exactly the kind of short-term memory loss I experience - a huge issue for me, since my cancer treatment. I therefore plan to try and get off the drug, or at least reduce the dose to the minimum (100mg). Alas, no miracle comes without a price it seems."

-Sue, breast cancer patient, aged 60

Women who have had chemotherapy are more likely to have problems with memory or concentration. This is a well-known side-effect of chemotherapy – it is sometimes called *chemo-brain* or *cancer brain* and it can reduce over time.

"I also suffer from what some cancer patients call cancer brain. I get stuck for words, forget the names of things. There was a study in the US which identified that this is quite a common cancer side effect."

-Alison, breast cancer patient, aged 62

If you are struggling with your mood, or experience anxiety or depression, you may feel your mind is less clear. The same is true if you sleep badly. If mood and disturbed sleep are a problem for you, you can find out more about them, and what might help, elsewhere in the HT&Me website.

What can help with memory problems?

This section focuses on the things you can do that may help you manage and cope with problems with memory and concentration. Some of these suggestions below may seem obvious, but many women find them helpful.

It is important to remember that **not everyone's problems with memory and concentration are the same**, so it is worth trying things out to see if they help you. This can give you a sense of control which can also make you feel better.

"My concentration has been significantly impacted though, and my short-term memory is much poorer too. Having to compensate by being super organised, keeping good lists and thorough diaries etc."

-Suzi, breast cancer patient, aged 53

Tips for helping your memory

Problems with memory and concentration can come and go and might depend on what you are doing at the time. Getting to know if any particular situation or activity triggers problems might make them easier to manage. For example, if you are trying to do several things at once in your normal daily life, you might notice these changes more than someone who does not.

- **Keep a diary or calendar** to help you remember your activities and appointments. You could keep a small paper diary in your handbag, or use an electronic diary on your phone.
- **Keep notes to remind yourself of activities/tasks.** You could use your phone to do this, or carry a notebook with you.
- **Make 'to do' lists of important tasks.** You could even write on post-it notes and stick them up where you can see them.
- **Break down phone numbers or passwords into segments,** focussing on one segment at a time to make it easier to learn.
- You can also **use the secure functions on your personal computer to automatically store passwords;** for example, when google pops up and asks if you want to store log in details, you can click yes.
- **Try repeating information back to people** to check you have understood clearly or remembered key things.
- Try to **avoid doing too many things at one time.** If possible, try to focus on one task at a time.
- If you have a medical appointment, you could: write down beforehand a list of questions you want to talk about; take someone with you to remember anything you forget; take notes during the discussion; or even record the appointment. You can find more hints and tips about this in the **Help and Support** section.

How a healthy lifestyle can help your memory

You may find some of the following tips helpful:

- Studies suggest that **aerobic exercise and strength training** may help keep your mind in shape too.
- Getting **a good night's rest** can help improve fuzzy thinking and 'brain fog'. Try to set up a nightly ritual to follow to encourage deeper, more restful sleep. Try to limit alcohol and caffeine close to bedtime, and avoid using your phone, tablet or watching television just before bed. There are lots of hints and tips about improving sleep in the Sleep Problems section.

- **A healthy diet** helps to fuel the brain. See the **Healthy Eating** section within Health Living, Health Mind for tips and advice.
- Try to **keep stress levels in check**. If you are having problems with stress, anxiety or depression, you might find it helpful to discuss these with your GP.
- Some people find that **mind games** such as crossword puzzles or Sudoku help keep their brain active and help with memory and concentration.

“Now I do crosswords and I find if I’m doing sort of mental exercises then my memory’s better but I am absent-minded. I mean I can lose car keys or the front door keys or forget things so yes, I would say that is quite noticeable. Or I’ll put things away or not remember where I’ve put them.”

-Mandy, Health Talk Online, aged 58

Meditation, mindfulness and complementary therapies

Some people have found that meditation and mindfulness can help with memory and concentration. Meditation may help with relaxation so that you will have more energy for everyday tasks, and your brain won’t ‘wander off’ so often. You may like to look at some meditation and mindfulness guides online. For example, Headspace is an app that teaches you how to meditate. You can download the app, or browse for free guided meditations and mindfulness exercises online.

You may find this video helpful to see an example of how to practice mindfulness. To take a look, type this weblink into your browser:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZtGtxs2q7Y

You may also consider trying complementary forms of therapy. Although scientific evidence that these are work for problems with memory or concentration is limited, some women have found them helpful. Things you can try include acupuncture and hypnotherapy.

Further help and support for memory problems

What should I do if these problems are really impacting on my life?

If these hints and tips do not help and the problems with memory or concentration become very difficult for you, or get worse as time goes on, and badly impact on your day-to-day life, it is important to talk to your breast cancer team or GP. They may be able to suggest something which will help.

Support from Breast Cancer Now Nurses

You may find it helpful to use the confidential ‘**Ask our nurses**’ email service on the Breast Cancer Now website, especially if you find it difficult to talk to someone in person. To access this, type this weblink into your browser:

<https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/support-you/email-our-nurses>

Where can I speak to other women?

You do not have to cope with problems with your weight on your own. You may find it helpful to join online forums and support groups to talk to other women who are in a similar situation to you. One example of this is the Breast Cancer Now online forum. To take a look, type this weblink into your browser:

<https://forum.breastcancernow.org/>

Other websites and resources

Here are links to websites and information you may find helpful. To take a look, type the following weblinks into your browser:

- For online Sudoku puzzles: <https://sudoku.com/>
- For online daily crossword puzzle: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/crossword/>
- To go to Breast Cancer Now: The research and care charity:
<https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/facing-breast-cancer/going-through-breast-cancer-treatment/side-effects/side-effects-chemotherapy/cognitive-impairment-chemo-brain>
- To go to Macmillan Cancer Support: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/chemo-brain>
- To go to Cancer Research UK: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping/physically/sex-hormone-symptoms/women-coping-with-hormone-symptoms/thinking-and-memory>

Feeling Sick

Some women feel sick when they start hormone therapy. This usually gets better after a few weeks. If this is a problem for you, taking the hormone therapy tablet with food or at night may help you feel less nauseous.

If you continue to feel sick, and it does not improve, you can talk to your practice nurse or GP. They may be able to give you further advice or drugs to help.

Skin Changes

Some women find that they experience changes to their skin after starting to take hormone therapy. Their skin may feel dry or they may get an itchy rash.

If your skin is dry or itchy, you can ask your pharmacist for an emollient cream and/or emollient wash, which you can use every day.

Some women also experience hair loss or thinning, and changes in the colour or thickness of their nails.

If problems persist or get worse, you can talk to your practice nurse. They can give you advice and may prescribe some medicine to help.

It is very important to contact your GP straight away if you get a severe skin rash.

Headaches

Some women get headaches when they start hormone therapy. If headaches are a problem for you, you can take your usual painkillers or ask your pharmacists to recommend some.

If you keep getting headaches regularly, you can talk to your practice nurse or GP.

Long-term side-effects of aromatase inhibitors

Oestrogen helps to maintain healthy bone strength. As aromatase inhibitors lower oestrogen levels, this can have a negative effect on bone health and can cause osteoporosis (thinning of the bones).

This effect is well known, and your breast care team will be regularly monitoring your bone density using scans called DEXA scans, to ensure there are no issues. You may be asked to take calcium or Vitamin D supplements to keep your bones healthy.

Your doctor may also prescribe you another drug called a bisphosphonate to increase bone density and strength.

There are other things you can do to help keep your bones healthy. You may want to **eat more foods that are rich in calcium, such as milk, cheese, yoghurt and cereals. For vitamin D, you can increase the amount of oily fish, mushrooms and eggs you eat. Stopping smoking and doing regular resistance exercise can also help keep your bones strong.** To read more about how to eat healthily you can go to the Healthy Living, Healthy Mind section and click Healthy Eating.

To read more about how to be more active you can go to the Healthy Living, Healthy Mind section and click Being Active.

Long-term side-effects of tamoxifen

Taking tamoxifen can also sometimes result in some long-term health effects described below.

Blood clots

Women who are taking tamoxifen are at increased risk of blood clots. Blood clots are uncommon but they can be harmful. It's important that you tell your GP or breast cancer team immediately if you have any symptoms of a blood clot – such as pain, redness or swelling in a leg or arm, breathlessness or chest pain.

Effects on the womb (Endometrium)

There is some evidence that taking tamoxifen can increase the risk of womb cancer. However, this is a very small risk, and the benefits of taking tamoxifen far outweigh the risk of womb cancer. Only around 1 woman in 1000 women who are taking tamoxifen will develop womb cancer.

Because of this risk, any new womb cancer is likely to be caught early. When caught early, treatment for womb cancer is very successful. It is therefore important that you tell your GP or breast cancer team if you have any unexpected or irregular vaginal bleeding. They will then arrange for an examination to look for any changes to the lining of the womb.

Positive benefits

As well as potential adverse effects, tamoxifen also brings some benefits. Tamoxifen has been shown to help lower cholesterol levels and also helps to slow down bone thinning in post-menopausal women. In women who are post-menopausal there is evidence that tamoxifen actually slows down the process of bone loss, thus reducing the risk of osteoporosis.