

# ZOLEDRONIC ACID FOR PRIMARY BREAST CANCER

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## About this booklet

It's normal to have lots of questions when you've been prescribed a drug like zoledronic acid as part of your treatment for primary breast cancer.

This booklet explains what it is, how it works, who might be offered it and some of the side effects it can cause.

## What is zoledronic acid?

Zoledronic acid is a drug given to reduce the risk of breast cancer coming back and spreading to the bones and other parts of the body.

You may hear it called by its brand name Zometa.

Zoledronic acid belongs to a group of drugs called bisphosphonates. You may hear bisphosphonates called bone-hardening or bone-strengthening treatment.

## How does zoledronic acid work?

Bisphosphonates slow down or prevent bone damage.

In all our bodies, whether or not we have cancer, bone tissue breaks down over time and is replaced with new bone tissue. This is a natural process called bone remodelling.

Cancer cells seem to be drawn to areas where bone remodelling is taking place, so secondary breast cancer commonly affects the bones (as well as the lungs, liver and brain).

Bisphosphonates like zoledronic acid work by being absorbed in areas of the body where there is a lot of bone remodelling. This interferes with the remodelling process so may reduce the risk of breast cancer spreading to the bones and elsewhere in the body.

# When is zoledronic acid prescribed?

## Primary breast cancer

Zoledronic acid is suitable for some women with primary breast cancer. It is given to reduce the risk of breast cancer coming back.

Zoledronic acid is prescribed for women who have been through the menopause (post-menopausal women). It can be used regardless of whether the menopause happened naturally or because of breast cancer treatment.

The benefits of using zoledronic acid before the menopause are less clear.

You may be offered zoledronic acid if you are post-menopausal and have had treatment for invasive breast cancer that has spread to the lymph nodes under the arm.

Zoledronic acid may also be considered if your cancer has not spread to the lymph nodes but other factors increase the risk of it returning.

You can read more about the lymph nodes in our booklet **Understanding your pathology results**.

Zoledronic acid is usually started within 3 months of final surgery. If you are having chemotherapy after surgery, you'll usually start taking zoledronic acid within 2 months of completing chemotherapy.

## Other uses of zoledronic acid

Zoledronic acid is also prescribed:

- For people who are at risk of, or who have, osteoporosis (when bones lose their strength and are more likely to break)
- As treatment for secondary breast cancer in the bone (when cancer that started in the breast has spread to the bones)

The information in this booklet is for women who are having zoledronic acid to reduce the risk of primary breast cancer coming back and spreading.

## How is zoledronic acid given?

Zoledronic acid is given as a drip into a vein in your hand or arm (intravenously).

If you had chemotherapy and you have another way of accessing your veins, such as a PICC line or central line, this can be used to give you the drug.

The infusion is usually given in the chemotherapy department of your hospital and takes about 15 minutes.

You may be given an infusion of zoledronic acid every 6 months for 3 years or every 3 months for 2 years.

## Side effects of zoledronic acid

Like any drug, zoledronic acid can cause side effects. Everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people have more side effects than others. Side effects can usually be managed and those described here will not affect everyone.

This booklet does not list all the possible side effects. If you're worried about any side effects, regardless of whether they are listed here, talk to your GP or treatment team.

### Common side effects

#### Flu-like symptoms

Zoledronic acid can cause flu-like symptoms such as joint and muscle pain.

Other flu-like effects include fatigue, shivering and fever. These can last for a few days.

Your treatment team can advise you about taking mild pain relief to help.

#### Feeling sick (nausea) or being sick (vomiting)

This is usually mild. Your treatment team can prescribe you anti-sickness drugs to relieve it.

## Headache

You may have a headache lasting for a couple of hours to a couple of days after your infusion. Let your treatment team know if you get headaches as they can advise you about taking mild pain relief.

## Red or sore eyes

Your eyes may be sore or red for a few days after your treatment. Your treatment team can prescribe eyedrops to relieve this.

## Anaemia

Having too few red blood cells is called anaemia.

If you feel particularly tired, breathless or dizzy, let your treatment team know.

You'll have regular blood tests throughout your treatment.

## Less common side effects

### Diarrhoea

This is usually mild. Your treatment team can prescribe anti-diarrhoea medication to help control this.

Contact your treatment team if you have 4 or more episodes of diarrhoea within a 24-hour period.

Drink plenty of fluids to avoid getting dehydrated.

### Low calcium levels in the blood

Zoledronic acid can cause calcium levels in the blood to drop too low. This is called hypocalcaemia. You'll have regular blood tests to check your calcium levels.

Early symptoms of hypocalcaemia include tingling around the mouth and lips and in the hands and feet. Let your treatment team know if you experience any of these.

Your treatment team may recommend calcium and vitamin D supplements.

## Allergic reaction

Zoledronic acid can sometimes cause an allergic reaction. Let your treatment team know straight away if you become breathless or start to develop an itchy rash.

## Osteonecrosis

Zoledronic acid can cause some of the jaw bone to lose its blood supply and die. This is called osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ). It's a rare but serious side effect of zoledronic acid.

Your treatment team will recommend you see a dentist before starting zoledronic acid. If you need any dental work, it's important to speak to your treatment team, as any dental problems with your teeth or gums must be completely healed before starting treatment.

If you need to have a dental procedure, such as having a tooth removed, you'll need to wait at least 4 weeks afterwards before starting or restarting zoledronic acid.

If you don't have a dentist or you are having difficulty registering with one, let your treatment team know.

When you are having zoledronic acid, you may be given a dental alert card to show a dentist if you develop any symptoms of ONJ. These include:

- Lasting jaw pain
- Loose teeth
- Swelling, redness or ulcers on the gums

Let your treatment team and dentist know straight away if you have any of these symptoms.

ONJ is hard to treat so trying to prevent it is very important. Good dental hygiene can help reduce the risk of developing it. This includes brushing your teeth and flossing, making sure dentures fit well and having regular dental check-ups.

There is also evidence that people who smoke are more at risk of developing ONJ. Speak to your treatment team or GP if you need support with stopping smoking.

It's not clear how long the risk of ONJ continues for even once the treatment is completed.

In rare cases osteonecrosis can affect the ear. If you have any ear pain, discharge from your ear or an ear infection while having zoledronic acid, let your treatment team know.

### Fracture

Although it's rare, zoledronic acid can cause the large bone in the upper leg (femur) to fracture. It's not fully understood why this happens.

If you have lasting pain in your thigh, hip or groin, let your treatment team know.

### Effects on the kidneys

Zoledronic acid can affect the way the kidneys work.

You will have blood tests before you start treatment and throughout treatment to monitor this.

## Further support

If you'd like any further information on zoledronic acid or just want to talk things through, you can call our free helpline on **0808 800 6000**.

You never have to face breast cancer alone. Find somebody who understands what you're going through with Someone Like Me on **0114 263 6490**.

You can find out more about our support services online at **breastcancernow.org/oursupport**

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## NOTES

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We're Breast Cancer Now, the research and support charity. However you're experiencing breast cancer, we're here.

## Life-changing support

Whoever you are, and whatever your experience of breast cancer, our free services are here. Whether you're worried about breast cancer, dealing with a diagnosis, working out life with or beyond treatment – or someone you love is.

## World-class research

We support over 290 of the brightest minds in breast cancer research. They're discovering how to prevent breast cancer, live well with the disease, and save lives. Every day, they get closer to the next breakthrough.

## Change-making campaigns

We fight for the best possible treatment, services and care for everyone affected by breast cancer, alongside thousands of dedicated campaigners.

### Could you help?

We don't get any government or NHS funding for our support services or health information. So, we rely on donations and gifts in wills to make our vital work happen. If you'd like to support us, go to [breastcancernow.org/give](http://breastcancernow.org/give)

# ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Zoledronic acid for primary breast cancer was written by Breast Cancer Now's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.



For a full list of the sources we used to research it:  
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# BREAST CANCER NOW

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## Information you can trust, support you can count on

Whatever breast cancer brings, we're here for you.

Whether you're looking for information about breast cancer or want to speak to someone who understands, you can rely on us.

Call **0808 800 6000** to talk things through with our helpline nurses.

Visit **breastcancernow.org** for reliable breast cancer information.

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