

Taking hormonal treatments after breast cancer

Information for patients, relatives and carers

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Introduction

We know from experience that some people who have had breast cancer find it hard to decide to take hormone treatment or have strong feelings about taking it on a long-term basis. We have developed this leaflet to give you the chance to hear about how others in your position have felt. This leaflet will also give information that will help you make a decision about taking hormone tablets.

The full leaflet about your specific hormonal treatment includes information about why it has been prescribed for you and how it works. If you have not been given this, please request it from your specialist breast care nurse or look on the Breast Cancer Now website www.breastcancernow.org.

Why do some people have negative feelings about taking hormonal treatment?

Since you were diagnosed with breast cancer, you have had to take in a lot of medical information over a short period of time. You may also have been through challenging treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy.

Hormone treatment tends to be prescribed at the end of the other treatments (although not always). So, you may not feel as well prepared as you were for the other treatments. By the time most people are prescribed this medication, they have been through a lot physically and emotionally, may feel they have been on a medical rollercoaster and are keen for their medical treatment to be over with. When the main part of your treatment ends, it is natural to want to take back that control.

For your medical team, taking hormone treatment once a day may seem insignificant compared to what you have already been through, but to you it may feel like another barrier to returning to 'real life.'

Taking medication every day can, for some people, be a reminder of their cancer experiences and may make it more difficult for them to start putting cancer in the background.

You may also feel so confused about your feelings about taking hormonal treatments that you find it challenging to even start taking the first prescription.

Even though you know logically that you will benefit from it, emotionally you may not want to take it. This shows us just how much you want to be back 'in the driving seat' and in control of your own life again.

Coping with the side-effects of hormonal treatments

These drugs can have significant side-effects. Everyone reacts differently and for some, these side-effects can be stronger and therefore more difficult to tolerate.

Different symptoms have different meanings to people. For example, women who may have been hoping to have children or expand their family can find it distressing to get menopausal symptoms.

Going through an early menopause can make some women feel older than they are.

Other women may interpret menopausal symptoms in a positive way and may feel that they are 'getting their menopause over with' more quickly than their friends or relatives.

If you want detailed information on side-effects, please read the specific leaflet on your medication, which is available from your breast nursing team or online.

It may help to write a list of the current symptoms you experience taking hormone treatment and how troublesome they are to you personally.

If you have started your hormone treatment, it may help to put a star by the side effect that bothers you the most. If you have not started taking the tablets yet, consider which side-effects are you most worried about getting.

The side effects that worry me most are:

1.

2.

3.

Reasons you may be reluctant to stop taking hormonal treatments?

Hormonal treatments tend to be prescribed for a certain time and then stopped. In our experience, some people can find taking this medication reassuring and when it comes to the time for them to stop taking it they can be reluctant to do so. This is mainly because they view the hormone tablets as a useful part of their cancer treatment and they are reassured by the extra protection it gives them from cancer developing. Without the medication, they feel more anxious.

It is important to realise that having some anxiety about cancer coming back is very normal. There may be other ways of combating your anxieties that are healthier for you. For example, could it help to talk to your specialist nurse or doctor about your fears of your cancer returning? This could be a good starting point which may well clarify the situation for you.

When it does eventually come to the time for you to stop taking the hormonal treatment that you have been prescribed, it is normal to feel a little apprehensive, but remember that the benefits of this treatment continue long after you have stopped taking it. This means that you will continue to be protected by its action.

Coming to the end of your time on this medication can be symbolic of taking a step away from your cancer experiences, leaving you with fewer reminders of cancer in your life. It also shows that your cancer team, who are familiar with your personal results and cancer diagnosis, now feel that you no longer need the medication. This is good news!

We trust you found this booklet helpful and that it helps you to make sense of your mixed feelings about hormone therapy. We hope you will see that other people have also struggled with this issue and that your cancer team are used to discussing mixed feelings and emotions about treatment.

Useful websites and information

Here are some websites to useful information online:

www.menopauseandcancer.org

Offering a range of accessible and practical support and services to help manage menopausal side effects

www.breastcancernow.org – use their search facility to look for your prescribed hormone therapy drug or read blogs with comments for others who are taking hormone therapy

www.macmillan.org.uk – search for hormone therapy or menopausal symptoms and cancer treatment

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

Care Specialist Nurses on 01904 726775 or email us at yhs-tr.yorkbreastcarenurses@nhs.net

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website:

www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/

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