

# Primary Endocrine Therapy

## What is primary endocrine therapy?

Endocrine therapy is a treatment option for some women with breast cancer. It involves taking a tablet once a day to control and possibly reduce the size of your tumour.

## Why do I need it?

Once you have been given a diagnosis of breast cancer your doctor will discuss various treatment options with you. Not every breast cancer or patient is the same and so treatment must be tailored to you. Treatment could be in the form of surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy or endocrine therapy (tablets). Every case is discussed at a multidisciplinary team meeting and an individual treatment plan is formulated. Primary endocrine therapy (hormonal treatment) is the treatment of choice for you. This is based on the results of the tests you have had, your general health status and your personal preference.

## How do I take the tablets?

It is usually best to take your tablet at the same time each day. If you forget one day don't worry, but start again the next day.

## How does it work?

Some breast cancers are stimulated and encouraged to grow by the female hormone oestrogen. The biopsy you have had will show how responsive your tumour is on a scale from 0-8 (8 being the most sensitive). After a woman has gone through the menopause oestrogen is still produced by the body, usually in body fat. Hormones (androgens) within the fatty tissue are converted into oestrogen by an enzyme known as aromatase. The endocrine therapy (hormone tablet) works by stopping the conversion of these hormones into oestrogen, reducing the amount of oestrogen in your body.

It is expected that the tablet will control the cancer and you may notice the tumour feels softer or reduces in size.

However over time the medication could become less effective and the tumour may even begin to increase in size. If this happens a different approach will be discussed with you. This may mean switching your medication, considering surgery or radiotherapy.

## **Are there any side effects?**

Common side effects may include:

- pain or stiffness in joints
- hot flushes
- nausea
- headaches
- vaginal dryness.

Symptoms are usually mild and temporary and you may not experience any, but if you do and you are concerned please contact your Breast Care Nurse for advice.

As this treatment reduces the oestrogen circulating within your body, over time your risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) increases. Your doctor may therefore arrange for a bone density scan to assess the strength of your bones. If your bones show signs of thinning your doctor may prescribe a bone strengthening drug to reduce further damage.

There are different medications available and you will be given specific information regarding the medication you have been prescribed.

## **What can I do to help?**

There are also things you can do to keep your bones healthy such as eating a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D eg, milk, cheese, yogurt and cereals. Regular weight bearing exercise and not smoking can also help.

## **What follow up can I expect?**

Your Breast Care Nurse will contact you at 6 weeks to check how you are and how well you are coping with the medication. It takes time for the tablets to make noticeable changes to tumours so you will be reviewed by a Breast Care Nurse at the Mermaid Centre in 3 months. This will involve a clinical examination. You will be seen again in a further 3 months by the Breast Care Nurse. At this appointment you may also have an ultrasound scan, which will show how well your tumour is responding to the tablets. You will then have regular 6 monthly appointments to review progress and ensure the tablets are continuing to work.

If for medical reasons you cannot attend these appointments your GP will be asked to review you at 3 months.

## **Contact us**

It is important that you continue to take your tablets as prescribed. If you have any problems or concerns regarding your medication please contact your Breast Care Nurse on 01872 252880 or 252881.