Hormonal Therapy for Breast Cancer - Tamoxifen

Introduction

Breast cancer is a common condition that affects one out of 11 women. Tamoxifen is a type of hormonal therapy that helps treat breast cancer.

This reference summary will help you understand better the benefits and risks of tamoxifen.

Cancer and its Causes

The body is made up of very small cells. Normal cells in the body grow and die in a controlled way. Cancer happens when cells keep dividing and growing without the normal control. Cancer cells may spread to different parts of the body through blood vessels and lymph channels. Cancer treatments are used to kill or control these abnormally growing cells.

Cancers in the body are given names, depending on where the cancer originates. Cancer that begins in the lung will always be called a lung cancer, even if it has spread to another place such as the liver, bone or brain. The cause of a cancer in a patient cannot usually be specifically determined. Each cell contains hereditary or genetic materials called chromosomes. This genetic material controls the growth of the cell.

Cancer arises due to changes that happen in this genetic material. When the genetic material in a cell becomes abnormal, it loses its ability to control the growth of the cell. These sudden changes in genetic material can happen for a variety of reasons. They may be inherited from parents. Changes in genetic materials may also happen due to exposure to specific infections, drugs, tobacco or other factors.

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Breast Cancer

Breast cancer can happen in women after puberty and becomes more common as women age. Breast cancer may also happen in men. But this is rare.

Hormones are chemicals in the body that help regulate body functions. For instance, the hormone estrogen helps control menstrual periods in women. Breast cancer is sometimes influenced by hormones. Some patients take medicine that gives them additional hormones. These hormonal medications may also affect breast cancer. Your health care provider may ask about your menstrual periods and any hormone medications you may have taken.

Mammogram

Early forms of breast cancers do not spread to other parts of the body. These early forms have been found more frequently in the last several years because of the use of breast x-rays, also known as mammograms.

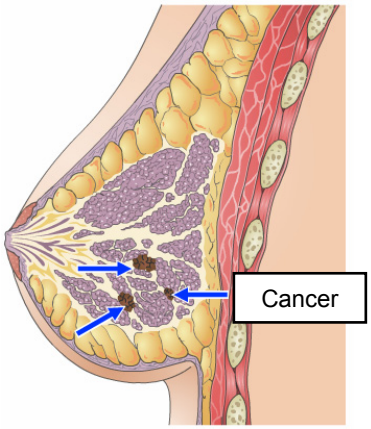
Stages of Cancer

Once the cancer is found, it is important to determine how much the cancer has grown. It is also important to determine if the cancer has spread to other parts of the body. These two pieces of information help your health care provider determine the stage of the cancer. This stage is used to determine the treatment that will be recommended.

Breast cancer is carefully analyzed by a pathologist. The pathologist is a health care provider who examines a sample of your cancer under a microscope and performs special tests to help determine whether treatment with hormonal medication is recommended. Health care providers determine the stage of an individual's cancer.

Treatment After Surgery

Surgery helps remove lumps of cancer. But it may not be possible to remove or kill every cancer cell.



Cells are very small. One million cells can be the size of a ballpoint on the end of a pen. One million cancer cells would also easily fit within the eye of a common sewing needle. Even with the most advanced equipment, cancer cells that cannot be seen or felt may be left behind after surgery.

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Your health care provider may recommend additional treatments after surgery. These are known as adjuvant treatments. Adjuvant treatments may include further surgery. Adjuvant treatments also include radiation therapy.

Adjuvant treatments also include drug therapies. Drug therapies may include:

- Hormones
- Chemotherapy
- Biologic therapy

These additional treatments reduce the risk that the cancer may recur. But they do not guarantee it. For this reason, your health care provider will want to continue to follow you in the months and years ahead, even after the adjuvant treatments have ended. If the cancer should recur, additional treatment may be used.

Tamoxifen

Tamoxifen reduces the chances of breast cancer recurrence. Tamoxifen is a form of hormone treatment. It is also called Nolvadex®. Tamoxifen is given in pill form.

Side effects of tamoxifen are usually mild. The most common effect is sudden feelings of sweats, flushing, or warmth often called hot flashes. These episodes may happen as often as several times a day and usually happen less often over a period of months or years.

Tamoxifen will often, but not always, stop the function of the ovaries and may stop a woman's menstrual periods. You should use some method of birth control while taking tamoxifen even if periods have stopped.

Tamoxifen could sometimes upset stomach the first few days it is taken. This usually goes away even if the medication is continued. Women who take tamoxifen have a slightly higher risk of blood clots. This risk is similar to the risk taken by women on birth control pills or estrogen hormones after menopause.

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There are slightly higher risks of cancer of the uterus in women who are taking or have taken tamoxifen. But this risk is rare. It is still important that women have regular pelvic exams and pap smears unless they have had the uterus removed. Tamoxifen seems to also increase the risk of strokes.

Recent studies have shown that some medications, especially some antidepressants, may decrease the effectiveness of tamoxifen. Check with your health care provider to make sure you are not taking any medication that will make tamoxifen less effective.

Summary

Cancer arises due to changes that happen in genetic material. When the genetic material in a cell becomes abnormal, it loses its ability to control the growth of the cell. Breast cancer can happen in women after puberty and becomes more common as women age.

Special treatment is needed to kill cancer cells that cannot be seen or removed by surgery.

Hormonal therapy as well as other adjuvant treatments reduces the risk that the cancer may ever come back but they do not guarantee a cure. Tamoxifen is an adjuvant treatment that reduces the chances of breast cancer recurrence.

Tamoxifen is safe. But it has some side effects and risks. Knowing about them will help you detect and treat them early if they happen.

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