



# ASK THE DOCTOR

## Tamoxifen

### What is tamoxifen?

Tamoxifen is a drug used to treat breast cancer and reduce the chance of breast cancer coming back. We also use it to prevent breast cancers for people who are at risk of getting breast cancer.

### How does tamoxifen work?

Some breast cancer tumors grow when they respond to the hormone estrogen. Tamoxifen blocks the effect of estrogen and helps slow the growth of cancerous tumors. Because of tamoxifen's anti-cancer effects, we may prescribe it to keep cancer from returning or to stop it from developing.

### How do I take it?

You take tamoxifen by mouth, as a pill. You may take it with food or on an empty stomach with a glass of water or juice. Be sure to take it at the same time every day.

### Are there any side effects?

Yes there are. At the right is a list of the most common side effects and what you can do about them. If any of these bother you, please talk to us about them.

### When should I stop taking this medication?

You will stop taking this medication after 5 years.

**Stop taking tamoxifen and call 911 immediately if you have:**

*(continued on the next page)*

Side effect	What you can do
Hot flashes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Take your tamoxifen before going to bed.</li><li>• If you have night sweats that keep you awake, try taking tamoxifen in the morning.</li><li>• Avoid alcohol, spicy foods, caffeine (coffee, tea, soda, chocolate).</li><li>• Get regular physical activity.</li><li>• Keep yourself cool with a fan and loose clothing.</li><li>• Wear layers so that you can take them off if you have a hot flash.</li><li>• Talk to us if your hot flashes still bother you. We may be able to help lessen them.</li></ul>
Vaginal discharge or dryness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use a vaginal moisturizer regularly or a water-based lubricant for occasional dryness.</li><li>• If dryness or discharge keeps bothering you, mention the issue when you come in for your next visit.</li></ul>
Abnormal vaginal bleeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If you have any vaginal bleeding, stop the medication and call your Ob/Gyn immediately.</li></ul>
Blood clots (Look for tenderness or hardness over a vein, calf tenderness, sudden cough, chest pain, being out of breath.)	<p>If you notice any symptoms of blood clots, you need to come in right away. Call for an appointment immediately. Be sure to tell us if you have ever had blood clots. To help prevent blood clots be sure to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stay physically active.</li><li>• Drink lots of fluids.</li><li>• Wear loose fitting clothing.</li><li>• Don't sit with your legs or ankles crossed for a long time.</li></ul>
Cataracts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make an appointment to have your eyes checked before beginning your treatment.</li><li>• Wear sunglasses when in the sun.</li></ul>
Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Call us if you feel unusually sad, tearful or have lost interest in things that you usually enjoy.</li><li>• Taking a walk or other regular exercise can be helpful.</li></ul>



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- Sudden severe headache
- Eyesight changes
- Slurred speech
- Loss of coordination
- Weakness or numbness in your arm or leg
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing

### Does tamoxifen interact with other drugs?

Yes, it may, but we can manage the interactions. If you are on warfarin (Coumadin), rifampin (Rifadin, Rofact), or an antidepressant, be sure to tell your doctor or pharmacist. This way, we have all the information and can make the best decisions about your medications. The most important thing is to take your medication as your doctor has prescribed, so that you are in the best health possible.

What is the chance of getting uterine cancer when taking tamoxifen?

It is less than 1 percent over the 5-year period that you would take this medication.

- Avoid using any hormone-based creams, suppositories, or over-the-counter supplements.
- See your Ob/Gyn doctor once per year if you still have a uterus. If you have spotting or irregular bleeding, call the Women's Health department promptly.

### Is it safe for me to get pregnant?

No. Tamoxifen can cause harm to a baby during pregnancy. We recommend that you use a highly effective method of birth control while you are on tamoxifen.

### Will it cause me to begin menopause?

No, but it may cause your period to not come as it usually does. If you are close to the age of menopause, your period may not return once treatment has stopped.

### Who needs to know that I am on tamoxifen?

All of your doctors and your dentist need to know that you are on tamoxifen before you get treated by them. If you plan to have major surgery, talk to us about the best time for you to stop and restart taking your medication.

### Before taking this medicine, you should:

- Tell your doctor about any other medications, prescribed and over-the-counter, you take.
- Ask questions about your treatment plan.

### Talk to us if any of the following bothers you:

- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or constipation
- Uncomfortable hot flashes
- Headaches or pains that do not go away with Tylenol
- Swelling in hands, feet, or lower legs
- Trouble sleeping
- Vaginal dryness or discharge
- Weight loss or gain
- Breast swelling or pain
- Cough or sore throat
- Itchy rash
- Depression, anxiety, or dizziness that is not usual for you

### Other resources

- Visit your doctor's home page at [kp.org/mydoctor](http://kp.org/mydoctor) to use online health tools, view your Preventive Services reminders, check most lab results, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to [ndvh.org](http://ndvh.org).

If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.

An emergency medical condition is any of the following: (1) a medical condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or body functions or organs; (2) active labor when there isn't enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital (or designated hospital) before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to your (or your unborn child's) health and safety, or (3) a mental disorder that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity such that either you are an immediate danger to yourself or others, or you are not immediately able to provide for, or use, food, shelter, or clothing, due to the mental disorder.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.