



FACTSHEET



information on **living with breast cancer**

HRT (hormone replacement therapy) and breast cancer

This factsheet is for women who may have questions about HRT, hormone replacement therapy, and its relationship to breast cancer. We hope it answers some of your questions and helps you to discuss your treatment with your GP or your specialist breast care team.

WHAT IS HRT?

HRT, hormone replacement therapy, is used to control the symptoms of menopause. The menopause occurs when a woman's menstrual cycle (periods) stops and she can no longer have children. It is often called the change of life. The average age for menopause in women is 52 years. Menopausal symptoms occur because the female hormones

progesterone and oestrogen are produced in small amounts by the body. HRT refers to the artificial replacement of these hormones. Following discussion with your doctor HRT is usually started to control menopausal symptoms including hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, poor concentration and other conditions. These can be quite severe in some women and very mild in other women.

HRT is sometimes used to prevent osteoporosis. This is a condition caused by low levels of oestrogen. It causes bones to become brittle and may result in fractures (broken bones). However, HRT should not be the first drug of choice as there are alternatives available.



WHAT TYPES OF HRT ARE AVAILABLE?

There are two types of HRT. One type consists of oestrogen alone and the other is a combination of both oestrogen and progesterone. Women who have a uterus (womb) need to have progesterone as well as oestrogen in their HRT preparation. This is to protect the lining of the uterus. Women who have had a hysterectomy (removal of the womb) can use oestrogen alone. In younger women, generally under 54 years, HRT is given in such a way as to produce a monthly bleed. In women over 54 years HRT is given in such a way as to avoid a monthly bleed. HRT can be taken in tablet form or as a patch or gel. Sometimes an implant may be used. Your doctor will discuss which route is best for you.

BENEFITS AND RISKS OF HRT

Benefits

- HRT reduces the symptoms caused by the menopause.
- HRT decreases the risk of bone fractures caused by osteoporosis.
- Recent studies have shown that HRT decreases the risk of colon cancer.

Risks

- Blood clots – there is a small increase in the risk of blood clots occurring in the legs and the lungs of women taking HRT. This risk is greatest in the first year of HRT.
- Breast Cancer – there is an increased risk of breast cancer associated with the use of HRT. The increase becomes apparent within 1–2 years of starting HRT. Recent studies have shown that the risk is related to the length of time a woman is on HRT. This is seen more with combined HRT, that is oestrogen and progesterone, rather than with oestrogen alone. However, in all cases, the risk of breast cancer begins to decrease when HRT is stopped and after five years reaches the same level as in women who have never taken HRT. Before a woman starts taking HRT her doctor

should review her own and her family's medical history. Women who are on HRT should be breast aware, (for a free copy of Breast Awareness leaflet call the Action Breast Cancer Helpline on freefone 1800 30 90 40) have an annual breast examination carried out by their doctor, and a mammogram (breast X-ray) every two years. As HRT can increase breast density, it is important that the doctor who is reading your mammogram knows you are on HRT.

HRT is not recommended for women who have a history of breast cancer or who have an un-investigated breast lump. However, if menopausal symptoms are very severe and affecting a woman's quality of life, her GP may consider a short-term, low dose trial of HRT with close monitoring.

- Endometrial cancer (cancer of the womb) – oestrogen only HRT increases the risk of endometrial cancer. This type of HRT should never be used in a woman who still has a uterus.
- The role HRT plays in heart disease remains unclear.



ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES TO HRT?

The menopausal years are a natural part of a woman's life. Some may require assistance with the changes that occur during these years. Although HRT can have beneficial effects, there are health concerns associated with its use and many women may not feel that hormones are a good choice for them. Women should discuss with their GP whether to take hormones and what alternatives are available.

All women can adopt a healthy lifestyle, such as not smoking, regular exercise and good nutrition. Many women find relief from short-term menopause related changes with non-prescription remedies such as oestrogen containing foods (soy products, wholegrain cereal and certain fruits and vegetables). It is important to discuss these measures with your cancer specialist before making any changes to your diet or before starting any supplements.

Local non-hormonal therapy is available for vaginal dryness. Short-term symptoms may stop without any therapy. Non-hormonal medication, such as raloxifene and alendronate, may be prescribed for osteoporosis.

For further information on the menopause and alternative therapies call the National Breast Cancer's Helpline on Freefone 1800 30 90 40 and ask for our factsheet

Understanding and Managing Menopausal Symptoms.

ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, provides breast cancer information and support, and funds breast cancer research. Our services are free, confidential and accessible.

For more information call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on Freefone 1800 30 90 40 or visit **www.cancer.ie/action**



USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer

43 / 45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline:
1800 30 90 40
Email: abc@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society

43 / 45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline:
1800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

Reach to Recovery

43 / 45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline:
1800 30 90 40

VHI Healthcare

IDA Business Park
Dublin Road
Kilkenny
Callsave: 1850 44 44 44
Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm,
Saturday 9am to 3pm
Website: www.vhi.ie

QUINN-healthcare

Mill Island, Fermoy, Co. Cork,
Lo Call: 1890 89 1890
Monday to Friday 8am to 7pm,
Saturday 10am to 3.30pm
Website:
www.quinn-healthcare.com

Hibernian Aviva Health

Postal Address:
PO Box 764, Togher, Co. Cork
Head Office:
Hibernian Aviva Health
One Park Place, Hatch Street
Dublin 2
CallSave: 1850 717 717
Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm
Website: www.hibernian.ie

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society

www.cancer.ie

Breast Cancer Care UK

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

American Cancer Society

www.cancer.org

The Susan G. Komen Foundation

www.komen.org

Europa Donna

www.cancereurope.org/
europadonna

Lymphodema Ireland

www.lymphireland.com

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland

www.mldireland.com

ABC – ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

- **National Breast Cancer Helpline** 1800 30 90 40 – staffed by specialist cancer nurses.
- **Patient care programmes** – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer.
- **Health Promotion** – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle.
- **Advocacy** – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland.
- **Professional support** – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients.
- **Research** – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work or make a donation please contact us.

action
breast
cancer

a programme of
irish cancer society

Freefone Helpline

1800 30 90 40

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