



FACTSHEET

a programme of
 irish cancer society

information on **drug therapy**

Taxol

This factsheet explains briefly what Taxol is, when it may be prescribed, how it works, what the benefits are and what side effects may occur. We hope it will help you to discuss your treatment plan with your healthcare team. Taxol is the brand name of the drug that is used throughout this section. Most people know it by this name, although its generic (general) name is paclitaxel. You may find it useful to read this factsheet with our booklet on **Chemotherapy**.

WHAT IS TAXOL?

Taxol is a chemotherapy drug that belongs to a group of drugs called taxoids or taxanes.

WHO MIGHT BE OFFERED TAXOL?

Taxol is used to treat some people with secondary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has spread to other parts of the body) where either the cancer has not

responded to other chemotherapy drugs or other drugs are not appropriate. It may also be used in combination with Herceptin. For more information see our Herceptin factsheet.

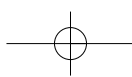
Taxol may be used to treat primary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has not spread to other parts of the body) only under certain circumstances, for example as part of a clinical trial.

It may also be offered after some other chemotherapy drugs (for example anthracycline and cyclophosphamide)

HOW DOES TAXOL WORK?

When normal cells start dividing, structures called microtubules are formed. Once the cells stop dividing these microtubules are broken down or destroyed. However, with cancer cells

Information. Support. Research.



Taxol stops the microtubules from breaking down. The cancer cells become blocked by microtubules so that they can't grow and divide, and they eventually die.

HOW IS IT GIVEN?

Taxol is given into a vein in the hand or arm in a drip. It is normally given every three weeks over a three-hour period, though it may be given at more frequent intervals, in lower doses to try to minimise the side effects.

Taxol can be given with other types of chemotherapy. If Taxol is being administered for advanced breast cancer, your specialist will probably want to assess how well the treatment is working after the first two or three sessions. For more information on secondary breast cancer, call the National Breast Cancer's Helpline on Freephone 1800 30 90 40.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF TAXOL?

Like any drug, Taxol can cause side effects. However, everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people have more side effects than others. The side effects of Taxol can usually be controlled. If you are concerned about any side effects, talk to your chemotherapy nurse or anyone on your treatment team.

If you are being given other chemotherapy or anti-cancer drugs with Taxol, you may have additional side effects.

Effects on the blood

Taxol can have a temporary effect on bone marrow, which is where blood cells are made. This can result in a low white cell count (increased risk of infection), a low platelet count (risk of bruising or bleeding) and occasionally a low red cell count (anaemia). The blood count will normally fall about seven days after you start your treatment. If it drops below a certain level, your next treatment may be delayed until your white cell count is within safe levels. You will have regular blood tests throughout your treatment. If you feel unwell and/or have a raised temperature following treatment, contact the hospital without delay.

For more information see our booklet on **Chemotherapy**.

Hair loss (alopecia)

Most people will lose all their hair, including eyebrows, eyelashes and body hair, which can be a shock. You may begin to lose your hair about two weeks after the first treatment. Hair loss is usually gradual but it can happen very quickly, sometimes over a couple of days. The hair loss is temporary and your hair will begin to grow back about a month after your treatment has ended.

For more information see our **Chemotherapy** booklet.

Numbness and/or tingling in hands or feet

People receiving Taxol may experience numbness or tingling

in their hands and feet. This is due to the effect of Taxol on the nerves and is known as peripheral neuropathy. Some people need painkillers to help with the sensations experienced. If you get this you should tell your doctor. In most cases it is mild and goes away soon after treatment stops. If it is severe, it may be necessary either to reduce the dose of the drug or to stop it completely. This side effect normally wears off after a few months.

Painful muscles and joints

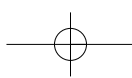
The muscles or joints may ache or become painful two to three days after you have your treatment. This usually wears off after a few days. You can take painkillers if necessary, but always discuss this first with your oncology nurse or doctor.

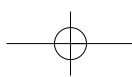
Tiredness or fatigue

You may become very tired after your treatment and this feeling can last for about a week. If you feel like this it is important to get plenty of rest.

Nausea

Nausea is a common side effect, although most people will not actually be sick. You may start to feel sick a few hours after your treatment and the feeling may last for several days. Taking anti-sickness tablets can help the nausea. If nausea persists contact your nurse or doctor.





Diarrhoea

You may have mild diarrhoea, but your hospital specialist or GP can prescribe medication to help control it. If diarrhoea persists contact your nurse or doctor.

Allergic reaction

If you have an allergic reaction to Taxol it will probably happen within the first ten minutes of your treatment. Before your treatment starts you will be given a combination of drugs to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction. You will be monitored closely during your treatment so that any reaction can be dealt with immediately.

Reactions can vary from mild to severe, although severe reactions are uncommon. Symptoms include flushing, skin rash, itching, back pain, shortness of breath, faintness, fever or chills. If you have a severe reaction, treatment will be stopped immediately and you may not be given Taxol again.

Changes in heart rate and blood pressure

On rare occasions Taxol can slow the heart rate and lower the blood pressure, so you will be carefully monitored for this during your treatment. If it happens it can be treated easily and doesn't mean you will have to stop your treatment. This is not the same as having an allergic reaction to Taxol (see above).

Sore mouth

You may find that your mouth is sore and small ulcers develop. Your specialist or chemotherapy nurse will advise you on suitable mouthwashes. Use a soft toothbrush for brushing your teeth.

Effects on the liver

Taxol may affect how well your liver works. This is temporary and will return to normal when the treatment has stopped. You will have regular blood tests to monitor this throughout your treatment.

Pain in the injection site

In a few cases mild pain can occur where the needle has been inserted or anywhere along the vein. If you are in pain tell your chemotherapy nurse immediately. After a few weeks you may notice tenderness, darkening and hardening near where the needle was inserted. This should fade in time.

Effects on fertility

It is not known exactly what effect Taxol may have on your fertility. Taxol may interfere with your normal menstrual cycle (periods). Some women's periods may stop, this may be temporary and it is important to use a barrier method of contraception, to prevent pregnancy while on Taxol.

Travel and vaccinations

If you are planning to travel abroad and require vaccination, it is important to consider your vaccination schedule and timing

of this. Some vaccines are less effective if given during treatment and some live vaccines can cause serious infections so should not be given. Live vaccines include those that protect against measles, yellow fever, rubella and typhoid.

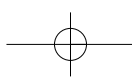
If you are planning this type of trip, please notify your oncologist, who can advise you on a safe time frame. Some specialists advise not to have live vaccines for six months after chemotherapy or until your immune system has recovered.

FURTHER SUPPORT

If you have any concerns about taking Taxol you can talk to your specialist, chemotherapy nurse or breast care nurse.

You may also find it helpful to talk to someone who has had a similar experience to you. Reach to Recovery is a programme set up to help and support women who have recently had a breast cancer diagnosis. The programme works on the principle of personal contact between the patient and a Reach to Recovery volunteer – a woman who has had surgery for breast cancer. Carefully selected and fully trained volunteers are available to provide advice and reassurance at a time when a woman is most in need of both.

For more information on individual support or support groups in your area, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline Freephone on 1800 30 90 40.





HELP FROM 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

OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer

43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4.
National Breast Cancer
Helpline Freefone:
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

Voluntary Health Insurance Board

VHI House
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1.
Callsave: 1850 44 44 44
Email: info@vhi.ie
Website: www.vhi.ie

Reach To Recovery

43–45 Northumberland Road
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4.
Freefone: 1800 30 90 40

Quinn Healthcare

Mill House
Fermoy
Co. Cork.
LoCall: 1890 70 08 90
Email:
info@quinn-healthcare.com
Website: www.quinn-healthcare.com.ie

Hibernian Health

PO Box 764
Freepost
Togher
Co. Cork
Phone: 1850 71 66 66
Email: support@hibernianhealthinsurance.ie
Website: www.hibernian.ie

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society
www.cancer.ie

Breast Cancer Care UK
www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Cancerbackup
www.cancerbackup.org

The Susan G. Komen Foundation
www.komen.org

Europa Donna
www.europadonnaireland.com

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland
www.mldireland.com

Lymphoedema Ireland
www.lymphireland.ie

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

First published by the Irish Cancer Society in November 2007.

© Irish Cancer Society, 2007

Updated July 2008 Review Date 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Irish Cancer Society.