

Information about Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) for women who have had a breast cancer diagnosis

Managing menopause symptoms is a key concern for many women who have had breast cancer.

There are many ways to manage menopausal symptoms, one of which is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). You may be wondering if you could use HRT to help relieve your menopausal symptoms.

This information leaflet has been written by breast cancer doctors to explain the risks of HRT, specifically for women who have had a diagnosis of breast cancer.

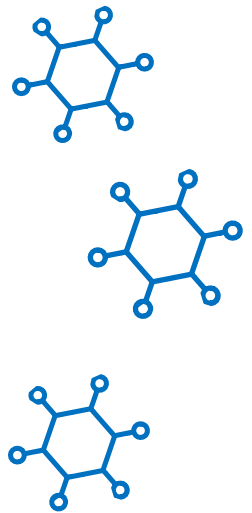


Is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) safe for managing menopause symptoms after breast cancer treatment?

Unfortunately, the risks of using HRT when you have had breast cancer are greater than for most other women.

Many breast cancers need hormones to grow:

- Hormones are your body's messengers; they travel in your bloodstream to organs in your body and tell those organs (like the breast) what to do. Two hormones that have strong effects on the breast are called oestrogen and progesterone.
- 3 out of 4 breast cancers are oestrogen receptor positive, and 2 out of 3 of these breast cancers are also progesterone receptor positive. These types of cancer are also called hormone receptor positive breast cancers. For these cancers, most breast cancer doctors agree that the hormones oestrogen and progesterone can act as "fuel" for the cancer and cause it to grow.



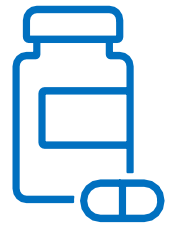
Blocking these hormones can control and treat many breast cancers:

In the 1970s, 4 out of 10 women survived beyond ten years after breast cancer. Now, it's nearer 8 out of 10. The improvement is partly due to breast screening, but mainly due to the development of medicines that block the effects of oestrogen. These medicines are called hormone therapy or endocrine therapy and include tablets such as tamoxifen, anastrozole, letrozole and exemestane.

These hormone-blocking medications increase survival by reducing the risk of breast cancers returning as secondary cancer in other parts of the body. They work by starving breast cancer cells, which need oestrogen to grow and spread. These medications have saved thousands of lives, with breast cancer survival doubling in the last 40 years.

Side effects of hormone-blocking treatment:

One of the most troublesome side effects of hormone-blocking tablets can be the development of menopausal symptoms (hot flushes, night sweats, mood swings, vaginal dryness). These symptoms develop because the hormone-blocking drugs used to treat breast cancer can also block or reduce oestrogen levels elsewhere in the body (not just in the breast).



Hormone replacement therapy (HRT):

HRT can help with menopausal symptoms, however, we also know that it reverses the beneficial effects of hormone-blocking breast cancer drugs and provides the body with hormones that could cause breast cancer cells to grow.

Clinical trials designed to test whether HRT is safe for women who have had breast cancer unfortunately show that HRT stops the oestrogen-blocking drugs from working. This results in a higher chance of breast cancers coming back as incurable secondary breast cancer somewhere else in the body. Some clinical trials show that breast cancer recurrence is 2.5 times greater for women taking HRT.

Women with hormone receptor negative breast cancers:

Women with hormone receptor-negative breast cancer can develop new hormone receptor-positive breast cancers in the future or develop hormone-receptor positive secondary breast cancer. It is for this reason that most breast cancer doctors do not advise taking HRT if you have had hormone-negative breast cancer.

Keeping reading for some information on how to manage your menopausal symptoms safely without using HRT...

Managing menopausal symptoms safely:

It is crucial to address the impact of your menopause symptoms. But your medical team must try to do this in the safest possible way, without increasing the risk of your breast cancer coming back. **HRT is not the only option for managing menopause symptoms.** Both lifestyle changes and non-hormone medications can work very well, if HRT is not safe for you.

Hot flushes and **night sweats** may be improved with the following lifestyle changes:

- Wear loose clothes, keep rooms well-ventilated, take a cool shower before bed, use light bed sheets and a cooling pillow to aid sleep.
- Cut down on caffeine, alcohol and spicy food and stop smoking, as they can all trigger hot flushes.
- Regular exercise and weight loss can reduce hot flushes and improve sleep.

Vaginal dryness or **discomfort** is a menopausal symptom which can often be managed without HRT:

- It is safe to use vaginal moisturisers that do not contain oestrogen e.g. *ReplensMD*. These should be used regularly, not just for sexual intercourse.
- If, despite vaginal moisturisers, symptoms persist, most breast cancer specialists agree that a vaginal lubricant containing a low dose of oestrogen (0.005% oestriol vaginal gel) is safe to use.
- You can ask your GP to prescribe these vaginal treatments.



In very rare instances, you and your breast cancer team may feel that there is a reason to prescribe HRT, even though you have had a previous breast cancer diagnosis. This decision should be taken carefully and after full discussion of the risks and benefits with a breast cancer specialist.

This information leaflet has been developed by the Greater Manchester Cancer Breast Pathway Board and a team of experts including breast cancer surgeons, oncologists, endocrinologists, menopause specialists, specialist nurses and patients, we hope you have found it useful.

References: Poggio et al. Safety of systemic hormone replacement therapy in breast cancer survivors: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Breast Cancer Res Treat.* 2022 Jan;191(2):269-275. doi: 10.1007/s10549-021-06436-9. Epub 2021 Nov 3. PMID: 34731351.
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