

Femara[®] (letrozole)

Femara[®] is a hormonal therapy for advanced breast cancer in postmenopausal women. Patients may have previously received tamoxifen or another anti-estrogen therapy that was unable to further control their cancer. Clinical studies have shown that Femara[®] can safely and effectively shrink tumors or stabilize the disease in some patients.

Some breast cancers are found to be hormone-dependent, meaning that estrogen increases their growth. These hormone-dependent cancers contain estrogen receptors (ER). When estrogen attaches to these receptors, it can cause cancer cells to grow. Cancers with these receptors are known as estrogen receptor-positive (ER+). Cancer tumors may also be estrogen receptor-negative (ER-), which means that the cancer grows without stimulation from estrogen. Hormonal therapies are not as effective in patients with ER- tumors. Your healthcare provider will tell you if your tumor is ER positive or ER negative.

Hormonal therapy is directed at preventing estrogen from causing the cancer cells to multiply. Femara[®] works in an entirely different way than other hormonal therapies such as Nolvadex[®] tamoxifen or Megace[®] (megestrol acetate). It slows down an enzyme, called aromatase, which reduces the total amount of estrogen in the body (circulating estrogen levels), thereby limiting the amount of estrogen that can reach the cancer cells.

In postmenopausal women, the aromatase enzyme causes the body to produce estrogen from other hormones, known as androgens. Without aromatase, androgens cannot be changed into estrogen. The key point to understand is that Femara[®] specifically blocks aromatase from converting androgen into estrogen. Consequently, Femara[®] significantly lowers the amount of estrogen in the bloodstream, thus allowing the cancer cells throughout the body to receive only low levels of estrogen. Furthermore, because Femara[®] acts specifically on aromatase, it does not affect the production of other hormones.

Femara[®] is a pill taken by mouth. Reports of weight gain and vaginal bleeding were far less than some other anti-estrogen drugs. The most common complaints reported from women taking Femara[®] were musculoskeletal pain, occasional problems with nausea, headaches, fatigue, or shortness of breath.

Side effects:

- Hot flashes
- Bone pain
- Back pain
- Joint pain
- Nausea
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Coughing