

# Zoledronic Acid (Zometa®) to improve outcomes in early breast cancer (information for patients)

This leaflet explains the use of zoledronic acid (Zometa®) in early breast cancer to reduce the risk of cancer recurrence.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak with a doctor or nurse caring for you.

## Evidence for use

Zoledronic acid is a type of drug called a bisphosphonate. It is used to treat osteoporosis. This is a condition when the bones become thinner or weaker. Bisphosphonates have been very effective in advanced breast cancer in improving symptoms of bone secondaries.

New research trials (involving thousands of women) have shown that acid can prevent breast cancer from returning in women who have **no** disease i.e. after surgery/radiotherapy and chemotherapy for **early** breast cancer. The research has shown that using zoledronic acid in **postmenopausal** women significantly reduces the risk of breast cancer recurring in either the bone by 28%, or elsewhere. This also reduces the risk of dying of breast cancer by 18% after 10 years<sup>1</sup>. The magnitude of benefit is similar to some of the chemotherapy benefits your doctor may have discussed with you.

The side effects and dental issues related to zoledronic acid are listed on the information sheets taken from Macmillan Cancer Support via the following link:

<http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/treating/supportive-and-other-treatments/bisphosphonates/zoledronic-acid.html>

Please do not hesitate to contact your consultant team if you need more discussion.

## How zoledronic acid is given

Zoledronic acid is given by a drip (infusion) into the vein through a fine tube called a cannula. It is usually given in the outpatient department at the hospital. The infusion takes at least 15 minutes and is given every 6 months for three to five years.

## **Possible side effects of zoledronic acid**

Some people have very few side effects while others may experience more. The side effects described here will not affect everyone having zoledronic acid. We have outlined the most common side effects but have not included those that are rare and therefore unlikely to affect you. If you notice any effects that are not listed here, discuss them with your doctor or nurse.

### **Increased pain**

Some patients may experience pain for a short time when you start taking zoledronic acid. If this happens, your doctor can prescribe painkillers for you until it wears off.

### **Flu-like symptoms**

These include a high temperature, chills, and pain in your muscles or joints. Let your doctor know if these effects are troublesome. It may be helpful to take mild painkillers.

### **Less common side effects of zoledronic acid**

Drop in calcium levels below the normal range. This is extremely rare and usually only temporary. It is unlikely to cause you any symptoms.

### **Effect on the kidneys**

Zoledronic acid can sometimes affect how your kidneys work. This does not usually cause any symptoms, and the effects are generally mild. Your doctor will check how well your kidneys are working during your treatment by doing blood tests.

### **Red or sore eyes**

Your doctor can prescribe eye drops to ease this.

### **Anaemia (low number of red blood cells)**

Symptoms of anaemia include feeling very tired and breathless. Your doctor can check whether you're anaemic by doing a blood test.

### **Headaches**

This is not common, but it is important to let your doctor know if you are getting headaches. They will advise you about what medicines to take. It's also important to drink plenty of fluids.

### **Feeling sick (nausea) and being sick (vomiting)**

If this happens, your doctor can prescribe very effective anti-sickness (anti-emetic) drugs to prevent or greatly reduce the sickness.

### **Jaw problems (osteonecrosis)**

A rare side effect of zoledronic acid is a condition called osteonecrosis of the jaw. This is when healthy bone tissue in the jaw becomes damaged and dies. Gum disease, problems with your dentures and some dental treatments, such as having a tooth removed, can increase the risk of this. So before you start taking the drug you will be advised to have a full dental check-up. During treatment with bisphosphonates it is very important to look after your teeth by brushing them regularly and having routine dental check-ups. Always let your dentist know that you're taking bisphosphonates.

Some of the symptoms of osteonecrosis can include pain, swelling, redness of the gums, loose teeth or a feeling of numbness or heaviness in your jaw. Tell your cancer specialist and dentist straight away if you have any of these symptoms.

## Additional information

You may be asked to take calcium and vitamin D supplements while having treatment with zoledronic acid. Your doctor will let you know if this is necessary.

## Non-cancer admission

If you're admitted to hospital for a reason not related to the cancer, it is important to tell the doctors and nurses looking after you that you are having treatment with bisphosphonates. You should tell them the name of your cancer specialist so that they can ask for advice.

## Emergency contacts

It is essential to know who you should contact if you have any problems or troublesome side effects when you're at home.

### Contact us

#### Who to call if you are unwell

Please contact:

##### Acute Oncology Assessment Unit

**020 7188 3754**

Monday-Friday 8:30am-6:30pm

##### Cancer Day Unit

**020 7188 6452**

Monday-Friday 8:30am-6pm

##### Out of hours

##### Hospital Switchboard

**020 7188 7188**

Monday-Friday 6:30pm-8:30am

Weekends and bank holidays 8:30am-6:30pm

Ask for the operator, then ask to speak to the **oncology registrar on call** (or the **haematology registrar on call** if you are a haematology patient).

## Useful sources of information

### Macmillan Cancer Support

w: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

w: [www.cancerresearch.org.uk](http://www.cancerresearch.org.uk)

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### **Your comments and concerns**

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS)      e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk  
t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)      e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

### **Language Support Services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815      e: languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

### **NHS 111**

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

### **NHS Choices**

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

### **Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust**

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

t: 0800 731 0319      e: members@gstt.nhs.uk      w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

### **References**

1. The Lancet, *Adjuvant bisphosphonate treatment in early breast cancer: meta-analyses of individual patient data from randomised trials.*

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60908-4/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60908-4/abstract) (accessed 5th October 2016).

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