

# Docetaxel (Taxotere)

This booklet explains what docetaxel is, when it may be prescribed, how it works and what side effects may occur.

Docetaxel is the generic (non-branded) name of the drug, but you may hear it called by one of its brand names such as Taxotere. You may find it useful to read this booklet alongside our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

## What is docetaxel?

Docetaxel is a chemotherapy drug. Chemotherapy is a treatment using anti-cancer (also called cytotoxic) drugs which aims to destroy cancer cells.

## How does docetaxel work?

Docetaxel works by stopping the cancer cells from dividing and multiplying which blocks the growth of the cancer.

## When is docetaxel offered?

Docetaxel is used to treat primary breast cancer (cancer that started in the breast and has not spread to other parts of the body) in combination with other specific chemotherapy drugs.

Docetaxel is also used alone or with other drugs to treat breast cancer that has spread to areas around the breast such as the lymph nodes above or below the collarbone (known as regional or locally advanced recurrence), or to other parts of the body (secondary breast cancer).

## How is docetaxel given?

Docetaxel is given through a drip into a vein (intravenously) in the hand or arm. If it's difficult to find suitable veins it may be given via a skin tunnelled catheter. See our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet for more information about these.

It's normally given every three weeks over approximately one hour. The interval between each course of treatment gives your body time to recover, and may vary depending on whether the number of blood cells has returned to normal between each cycle. In primary breast cancer a course of three to six treatments is usually given. For locally advanced and secondary breast cancer the number of courses will vary depending on the individual.

You will have docetaxel as an outpatient.

Before each dose you'll be given medication to reduce the chances of any possible reactions. See page 8.

## What are the side effects of docetaxel?

Like any drug, docetaxel can cause side effects and we list the main ones below. Everyone reacts differently to drugs and some people have more side effects than others. The side effects of docetaxel can usually be controlled or reduced and those described here will not affect everyone. If you're concerned about any side effects, regardless of whether they are listed here, talk to your chemotherapy nurse or cancer specialist (oncologist).

If you're being given other chemotherapy or anti-cancer drugs with docetaxel, you may have additional side effects from these drugs.

For more information about the side effects of chemotherapy, see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

## Common side effects

### Effects on the blood

Chemotherapy drugs can temporarily affect the number of healthy blood cells within the body. Blood cells (white blood cells, red blood cells and platelets) are released by the bone marrow (the spongy material found in the hollow part of bones) to replace those which are naturally used up within the body. Chemotherapy reduces the ability of the bone marrow to make these cells.

You'll have regular blood tests throughout your treatment to check your blood count. If your blood count is too low it may be necessary to delay the next course of treatment or reduce the chemotherapy dose given.

### Risk of infection

Not having enough white blood cells can increase the risk of getting an infection. Your resistance to infection is usually at its lowest point around 7-14 days after having chemotherapy. The number of white blood cells usually returns to normal before your next course of chemotherapy is due. When the white blood cells fall below a certain level, it's known as neutropenia. If you also have a high temperature (above 38°C), it's known as febrile neutropenia.

If you feel unwell, are shivering or have a temperature above 38°C at any time during your treatment you should contact the hospital immediately even if this happens at the weekends or during the night.

You should be given a 24-hour contact number or advice about seeking emergency care by your specialist team before starting chemotherapy.

At some point during your treatment you may need to be treated with antibiotics. In certain circumstances, your doctor may recommend injections of drugs that stimulate the production of white blood cells to reduce your risk of further infection. Your specialist will explain more about these injections if you are going to have them.

### **Anaemia**

Having too few red blood cells can mean that you are anaemic. If you feel particularly tired, breathless or dizzy, you should let your specialist team know. Occasionally a blood transfusion may be necessary during your treatment.

### **Bruising and bleeding**

Chemotherapy can reduce the number of platelets (which help the blood to clot). You may find you bruise more easily, have nosebleeds or notice that your gums bleed when you brush your teeth. You should tell your specialist team if you experience any of these symptoms.

### **Hair loss (alopecia)**

Docetaxel causes hair loss. Most people will lose all their hair, including eyebrows, eyelashes and body hair. You may begin to lose your hair about two weeks after the first treatment, but it can happen earlier. Hair loss is usually gradual but it can happen very quickly, possibly over a couple of days. It can sometimes be minimised by scalp cooling. This involves wearing a 'cold cap' before, during and for one to two hours after your treatment. How well the cold cap works depends on the drugs and doses used, and it does not work for everyone. Hair loss can be discussed with your chemotherapy nurses.

Hair loss should be temporary and in most cases your hair will begin to grow back a few weeks after your treatment has ended. Prolonged or permanent hair loss has been reported in a very small number of cases.

For more information about hair loss, see our **Breast cancer and hair loss** booklet.

## **Numbness and tingling in hands or feet**

Some people having docetaxel experience numbness or tingling in their hands and feet. This is due to the effect of docetaxel on the nerves and is known as peripheral neuropathy. In most cases it is mild and goes away soon after treatment stops. If it is severe, it may be necessary to reduce the dose of docetaxel or to stop it completely. It normally improves a few months after the treatment has finished, but it may not disappear completely.

If you have numbness or tingling, mention this to your specialist team when you see them next, so that the symptoms can be monitored.

## **Painful muscles and joints**

Your 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. However, it can be severe and you may need to take mild pain relief or anti-inflammatory drugs. It is a good idea to have some of these available before starting your treatment just in case you need them.

## **Fluid retention and weight gain**

You may develop a build-up of fluid in the body (oedema), which may take a few weeks to resolve. This can appear as swollen ankles and legs and feeling short of breath. The steroid drugs that you are given to prevent an allergic reaction to docetaxel (see the 'Allergic reaction' section on page 8) will help reduce the chance of fluid building up. You may also put on weight, but you will usually lose it again once the treatment has finished. However, this can vary for each person and may take up to several months. Physical activity and healthy eating may help minimise weight gain.

## **Skin reactions**

You may develop a rash anywhere on your body or your skin may discolour. This can be itchy. Your skin can also become dry and flaky or peel. Your doctor may prescribe medicine to help.

Skin reactions like this can develop on the palms of your hands and soles of your feet. This is known as palmar-plantar or hand-foot syndrome. This will improve after the treatment is finished. Your doctor may prescribe vitamin B6 (pyridoxine) to try to help with this.

If you experience skin reactions, mention this to your specialist team so they can monitor the symptoms. Ask your team if they recommend any particular creams for your skin before using anything on it yourself.

### **Nail reactions**

After a few doses of docetaxel, the colour of your nails may change but this will normally grow out over several months. The nails may also become brittle, crack or change in texture, for example ridges may form. Some people lose nails on their fingers or toes during or shortly after treatment, but they will grow back.

### **Sore mouth**

Your mouth may become sore and ulcers can develop. Your specialist or chemotherapy nurse can advise you about suitable mouthwashes or medicine if a mouth infection develops. For more information on coping with a sore mouth, see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

### **Taste changes**

While you are having docetaxel, your sense of taste can change and some foods may taste different. You may no longer enjoy some of the foods you used to. Your taste should return to normal once your treatment has finished.

### **Diarrhoea**

You may have diarrhoea but your specialist or GP can prescribe medicine to help control it. If you have persistent diarrhoea, you should contact your specialist team.

### **Tiredness (fatigue)**

You may become extremely tired during your treatment. For some people this fatigue can last for several weeks or even months after the treatment has finished. Physical activity can help improve fatigue.

Your ability to concentrate or think clearly can also be affected, which can be very frustrating. This is sometimes called 'chemo-brain' or 'chemo-fog' and usually improves over time after treatment has finished.

## **Nausea and vomiting**

Nausea is usually mild and most people will not actually be sick. You may start to feel unwell a few hours after your treatment but you will be prescribed anti-sickness drugs to reduce this or stop it happening.

For more information about nausea and vomiting, see our **Chemotherapy for breast cancer** booklet.

## **Pain in the injection site**

Pain can occur where the needle has been inserted or anywhere along the vein. If you experience pain while the drug is being infused, tell your chemotherapy nurse. After a few weeks you may notice tenderness, darkening and hardening around where the needle was inserted. This should fade in time.

## **Effects on fertility**

It is not known exactly what effect docetaxel has on fertility. However, any effects will also depend on other chemotherapy drugs you are having at the same time or have received in the past, and your age. Some women stop having periods (amenorrhoea) during chemotherapy, but this may be temporary. Women aged around 40 and above are less likely to have their periods return after completing chemotherapy than women under this age. It is important to use a barrier method of contraception, such as condoms, to prevent pregnancy while you are having docetaxel, as it may have a harmful effect on a developing baby.

If you are concerned about your fertility, it is important to talk to your specialist team before treatment begins. If you want to know more about your fertility or pregnancy after treatment, see our **Fertility issues and breast cancer treatment** booklet.

## **Less common side effects**

### **Changes in heart rate and blood pressure**

Docetaxel can alter the heart rate and affect blood pressure so you will be carefully monitored for this during your treatment. If changes to your heart rate and blood pressure happen, they can usually be treated easily and you will not have to stop your treatment. This is not the same as having an allergic reaction to docetaxel (see page 8).

## Allergic reaction

If you have an allergic reaction to docetaxel, it will probably happen within the first few minutes of your treatment and is most likely the first or second time you have the drug. Reactions can vary from mild to severe, although severe reactions are uncommon. Before your treatment starts, you will be given drugs called steroids to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction. These are usually given as tablets to take for three days starting the day before each cycle of chemotherapy. Take these as directed by your specialist team and don't stop taking them without talking to the team first.

You will be monitored closely during your treatment so that any reaction can be dealt with immediately. 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 docetaxel again.

## Other information

### Vaccinations

Some vaccines are safe to have during chemotherapy, others are not.

Live vaccines (which contain a small amount of live virus or bacteria that has been altered) could be harmful if you have a weakened immune system so should be avoided during treatment. Live vaccines include measles, rubella, yellow fever and typhoid. Some specialists advise you not to have live vaccines for six months after chemotherapy or until your immune system has fully recovered from the treatment.

Inactivated vaccines, such as the seasonal flu vaccine, are safe. The flu vaccine is usually recommend for people starting or on chemotherapy to reduce their risk of infection with the flu virus.

Your immune system needs to be healthy in order to make the antibodies to the vaccine that protects you from the flu. Speak to your hospital team about the best time for you to have the flu vaccine.

Docetaxel is not suitable during pregnancy or while breastfeeding.

# Helping you face breast cancer

Treatments for breast cancer can be complex and if you're wondering where to turn for support in making treatment decisions or coping with side effects, we can help with practical and emotional support.

## Ask us

Our free Helpline is answered by specialist nurses and trained staff with personal experience of breast cancer. They understand your issues and can answer questions. Or you can Ask the Nurse by email on our website.

Free Helpline **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay 18001)  
Monday–Friday 9am–5pm, Saturday 10am–2pm  
[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/ATN](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/ATN)

## Talk to someone who understands

Our Someone Like Me service puts you in contact by phone or email with someone else who's had breast cancer and who's been trained to help.

Online, you can chat to other people going through breast cancer on our professionally moderated discussion Forum or join a free, weekly Live Chat session.

## In your area

We provide a variety of services in person across the UK, including:

HeadStrong prepares you for the possibility of losing your hair because of cancer treatment. In a private meeting, trained volunteers talk with you about how to look after your scalp before, during and after treatment. They'll also share ideas on how to make the most of scarves, hats and other headwear.

Moving Forward Information Sessions and longer courses on adjusting to life after treatment. Both have expert speakers and offer the chance to talk to other people in the same situation as you.

Find out about all our services for people affected by breast cancer at [www.breastcancercare.org.uk/services](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/services) or phone the Helpline. We can help you decide which of our services are right for you.

## We're here for you: help us to be there for other people too

If you found this booklet helpful, please use this form to send us a donation. Our information resources and other services are only free because of support from people such as you.

We want to be there for every person facing the emotional and physical trauma of a breast cancer diagnosis. Donate today and together we can ensure that everyone affected by breast cancer has someone to turn to.

### Donate by post

Please accept my donation of **£10/£20/my own choice of £**

I enclose a cheque/PO/CAF voucher made payable to  
**Breast Cancer Care**

### Donate online

You can give using a debit or credit card at  
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Name

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We might occasionally want to send you more information about our services and activities

- Please tick if you're happy to receive email from us
- Please tick if you don't want to receive post from us

We won't pass on your details to any other organisation or third parties.

Please return this form to Breast Cancer Care, Freepost RRRKZ-ARZY-YCKG,  
5-13 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0NS



# About this booklet

**Docetaxel (Taxotere)** was written by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.



**For a full list of the sources  
we used to research it:**

**Phone** 0345 092 0808

**Email** [publications@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:publications@breastcancercare.org.uk)



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the breast cancer  
support charity

Breast Cancer Care is the only UK-wide charity providing specialist support and tailored information for anyone affected by breast cancer.

Our clinical expertise and emotional support network help thousands of people find a way to live with, through and beyond breast cancer.

Visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk) or call us free on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay 18001).

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