

Coping With Estrogen Loss

For People on Treatment That Affects Estrogen

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**Waterloo Wellington
Regional Cancer Program**

Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario)

What is Estrogen?

Estrogen is a hormone in the body. It is made mostly in the ovaries, glands, and other organs in the body like the:

- Liver
- Breasts
- Prostate

It plays a role in:

- Memory
- Joint movement
- Vaginal moisture
- Improving mood
- Managing body temperature
- Keeping bones strong and healthy

Treatments that Affect Estrogen

You are taking an anti-hormone treatment because your cancer can grow from, and is sensitive to, estrogen. Anti-hormone treatments can block estrogen from being used by cancer cells. They can also affect how estrogen is made in your body.

There are 3 main types of treatment that affect estrogen levels in your body:

Hormone Treatments

Hormone treatments that affect estrogen levels are:

- **Tamoxifen:** Blocks cancer cells from being able to use estrogen to grow.
- **Goserelin:** Blocks a signal to the ovaries so estrogen can't be made.
- **Letrozole, Anastrozole, and Exemestane:** Stops estrogen from being made.
- **Fulvestrant:** Blocks the effects of estrogen and lowers the number of estrogen receptors.

Radiation to the Pelvis

Radiation Therapy to the pelvis can damage or change how the ovaries work. This can lead to a loss of estrogen in your body and may result in permanent menopause (when a person stops getting their period). Radiation therapy to this area can also cause other side effects like tightening, thinning, and dryness of the vagina.

Surgery

The ovaries are glands that make estrogen in your body. An oophorectomy (surgery to remove the ovaries) will cause there to be less estrogen in your body.

How to Manage Side Effects

Achy Bones, Muscles, and Joints

Bone, muscle, and joint discomfort is a common side effect of many anti-hormone medicines. You might feel this in your hands, knees, back, hips, or shoulders. If you ever think about stopping your hormone therapy because of these symptoms, talk to your healthcare team first.

Helpful Tips

- Try to do light to moderate exercise 30 minutes, 5 days a week.
- Talk to your pharmacist or healthcare team about over-the-counter pain medications. They may be helpful and safe for you to use.

Hot Flashes

Hot flashes can make you feel extra hot or sweaty.

Helpful Tips

- Quit smoking
- Manage stress
- Exercise 5 days a week for at least 30 minutes
- Dress in layers or light materials like cotton, rayon, and linen
- Avoid food triggers such as; hot foods, spicy foods, caffeine, and alcohol
- Avoid hot tubs, saunas, hot showers if these trigger a hot flash for you

Mood & Memory Changes

You may notice changes to your mood as your estrogen levels change. You may be at higher risk for anxiety and depression.

Helpful Tips

- Eat a balanced diet; reduce caffeine
- Exercise 5 days a week for at least 30 minutes
- Stress reduction: yoga, massage, deep breathing, and favourite hobbies
- Talk to your family doctor about mood support medicine

Estrogen loss may make it harder to remember small, everyday details.

Helpful Tips

- Use your mind daily e.g. reading, game playing, attend lectures
- Write things down (Make lists or charts, cell phone reminders, journaling)
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet

Sexuality and Intimacy

Loss of estrogen can cause a change to your sexuality (sexual feelings, thoughts, attraction toward others) or intimacy (being close with another person). These changes can affect your quality of life and relationships. This may not seem like a big deal, but it's an important part of your well-being. Talking about these issues may feel hard, but your healthcare team can help.

You might notice:

- Changes to your body image
- Lower libido (less interest in being intimate and having sex)
- Physical changes during sex (like dryness and the need to use lubricant)

Helpful Tips

- Talk about physical or emotional changes with your partner
- Try new ways of being intimate
- Talk about your mood with your partner, family, or friends
- Learn more through the University Health Network's [sexual health resources](#)
- Talk to your healthcare team about a referral to a Sexual Health Clinic for people with cancer

UHN Sexual Health Resources

Cancer and cancer treatment can impact your sexual health. Learn more here:



uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret/Clinics/Adolescent_Young_Adult_Oncology

Vaginal Changes

Changes to your vagina can happen as estrogen levels change. This can include dryness, discharge, thinning, or inflammation of the vaginal tissue.

Dryness

To moisturize the vagina, talk to your pharmacist about how to use products like *Repagyn*® and *Replens*®. Before using an estrogen-based medicine talk to your Oncologist. For sexual purposes you can use water or silicone based lubricants (lube) that can be bought at the pharmacy, online, or in sex stores.

Lubricant Options	
Water Based	• Comes in a gel or liquid form • Can dry out faster • Read the ingredient list as water-based lubricants may include glycerin. If you are going through radiation treatment, do not use glycerin lubricants.
Silicone	• Stays slippery for longer • Can only be removed with soap and water. • These include K-Y Intrigue®, Eros®, Wet Platinum®, and Pink®.

Vaginal Discharge

It is normal to have clear, yellow, or white discharge. You can use a pad or underwear liner if needed. If you have any bloody discharge tell your healthcare team.

Radiation Vaginal Changes

If you are getting radiation treatment that affects the vagina it may lead to vaginal dryness and thinning. Your radiation team will give you more information about how to manage these side effects.

Lifestyle Changes

Nutrition

Eating a balanced diet is one of the best things you can do for your health. You are in control of your food choices, and your food choices can affect how you feel.

Eating well and staying at a healthy weight will help you to build up your strength, have more energy, and feel better overall. It can also help to lower your risk of new cancers, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

Eat these foods as part of a balanced diet:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grain products
- Dairy products (milk, greek yogurt, kefir, cottage cheese)
- Protein (chicken, fish, eggs, beans, lentils, or nuts)

Refer to Canada's Food Guide for more information on portions and food choices.

Canada's Food Guide

Learn about how to build a healthy plate, view recipes, and more.

food-guide.canada.ca



Natural Health Products

Natural health products include herbal remedies, vitamins or mineral supplements, homeopathic medicines, or traditional medicines.

Cancer treatments try to damage cancer cells while trying not to hurt healthy cells. Natural health products may change how your treatment works and targets cancer cells. They may even make side effects worse, or affect other health conditions. Information on natural health products during cancer treatment is always changing.

Tell your healthcare team if you are currently taking any natural health products. Also, talk to your healthcare team before starting any new natural health products.

Phytoestrogens

Phytoestrogens are a type of plant hormone that mimics human estrogen. Some foods, natural health products, or personal care products (like lotion), may have phytoestrogens in them. These substances can act like estrogen in the body. In high amounts, phytoestrogens may alter how your cancer treatment works.

Soy products and flaxseed are foods high in phytoestrogens. Eating **food sources** of soy and flaxseed are safe when taken in moderation, as part of a varied diet. **Do not take concentrated sources of these foods.** If you would like to include soy products or ground flax in your diet, you can do so by having:

- Less than 2 tablespoons of ground flax seeds per day
- Less than 2 servings of soy products per day. One serving is equal to: 1/2 cup of tofu, 3/4 cup of edamame, or 1 cup of soy milk

Products to Avoid

- Do not take estrogen, phytoestrogen, or isoflavone supplements even if they are recommended by a naturopath, herbalist, or your local natural health food store.
- Avoid use of estrogen-based creams, suppositories, or rings for vaginal dryness or hot flashes. Always talk to your Oncologist if you are thinking about using an estrogen-based pill or cream.
- Do not take soy or flax supplements.

Natural Health Products that have phytoestrogens in them should not be taken while you are on anti-hormone treatments.

Tell your healthcare team if you are taking, or planning to start, any natural health product(s).



Alcohol

Alcohol raises your risk of getting many cancers, such as breast cancer. If you drink, limit to no more than 1-2 standard drinks (12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of spirits) **per week**. If you don't drink, it is best not to start.

Smoking

Smoking can affect your body's ability to heal and process medicine. Smoking can also cause heart disease, lung disease, poor blood flow, ulcers, and other types of cancer. Even 1 or 2 cigarettes can be harmful. If you are interested in quitting smoking, please talk with your healthcare team or family doctor.

Weight Gain

Weight gain can be a normal side effect of estrogen going down (5-10 pounds or 2.3-4.6 kilograms). Regular exercise and diet changes can help maintain and manage a healthy weight.

Exercise

Exercise can help you have energy and stay strong during and after treatment. Any exercise is better than no exercise. Even a short walk each day can help. If you are not currently active, talk to your family physician before adding new exercises.

Exercise can help manage:

- Fatigue or tiredness
- Anxiety, depression, and sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Stress
- Bone thinning

Examples of simple, low-impact activity:

- Walking, brisk walking, or marching
- Stair climbing or riding your bike
- Doing housework or gardening
- Using an exercise bike, treadmill, or doing sit-ups while watching TV

Examples of muscle/bone strengthening activity:

- Using resistance bands
- Doing push, pull, or squat exercises with a weight

If you need help getting started safely with exercise, talk to your **family doctor** about a referral to a physiotherapist.

Osteoporosis Canada

Being active for at least 30 minutes (or more) each day has been shown to help people cope with the side effects of treatment.



osteoporosis.ca/too-fit-to-fracture

Bone Health

As you age, you lose bone mass and density (how hard your bones are). In menopause you can lose 1% of your bone mineral density each year. This can put you at higher risk for osteoporosis (where bone cells are lost faster than the body can remake them).

What can put you at higher risk for bone loss?

- Family history
- Smoking
- What you eat
- Chemotherapy
- Long-term corticosteroids (like hydrocortisone or prednisone etc.)
- Some hormonal therapies
- People who have an early menopause (when induced by chemotherapy or an oophorectomy)

Bone loss can be slowed by:

- Taking Bisphosphonates (medicine that helps slow down bone loss). Talk to your family doctor for more information.
- Daily exercise. The best way to keep bones strong is to do both **weight-bearing** and **muscle-strengthening** exercises.
- Eating enough calcium and vitamin D through diet and supplements.

Calcium and Vitamin D

To keep your bones healthy while on hormone treatment, you will need to take enough calcium and vitamin D. Refer to [Osteoporosis Canada's Calcium Calculator](#) to learn more about food sources.

Calcium	• Aim for 1200-1500 mg of calcium per day (combination of food and supplements). • Try to get Calcium from food sources first. For example 500 mg from a supplement and 700-1000 mg in food. • Calcium intake from all sources should not go past 2500 mg per day.
Vitamin D	• Aim for 1000 IU per day • Vitamin D is hard to get through diet alone and you will need to take a supplement to meet your needs • Your supplement may contain Vitamin K2. This is also safe to take.

Resources

Visit the J. Wesley Graham Patient & Family Resource Centre for more information about cancer and supports. You can also scan or click the links below to access more information:



[About Herbs Database
Memorial Sloan
Kettering](#)



[Calcium Calculator
Osteoporosis Canada](#)



[Complementary &
Alternative Therapies
Pathfinder
BC Cancer Agency](#)



[Sexual Health
UHN](#)



[Natural Health
Products and Breast
Cancer
BC Cancer Agency](#)

Use this resource for your information only. It does not replace medical advice from your doctor or other healthcare professionals.



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