

## Joint Pain with Aromatase Inhibitors

Aromatase inhibitors (AIs) are medicines used to treat hormone receptor-positive breast cancer, especially in postmenopausal women. These medicines lower estrogen levels in the body, which helps prevent cancer from coming back. However, a common side effect is **joint pain** (also called arthralgia), which can affect quality of life and make it harder to keep taking the medicine as prescribed.

### How common is joint pain with aromatase inhibitors?

Up to half of women taking aromatase inhibitors experience joint pain or stiffness. For some, the pain can be severe enough to consider stopping the medicine. The pain often starts within the first six months of treatment and may get worse over time. The most commonly affected areas are the knees, hands, wrists, ankles, and lower back. Carpal tunnel syndrome manifested by numbness, tingling and/or pain in the fingers and hands can also occur.

### What does the pain feel like?

The pain is usually described as aching, stiffness, or soreness in the joints. Some people also notice swelling or difficulty moving the affected joints, especially in the morning or after periods of rest. The pain can be mild or severe and may move from one joint to another.

### Why does this happen?

Aromatase inhibitors lower estrogen, which is important for joint and bone health. The drop in estrogen can lead to inflammation and changes in the tissues around the joints, causing pain and stiffness. Other factors, like having joint problems before starting treatment or more severe menopausal symptoms, can increase the risk of developing joint pain.

### What can help with joint pain?

- Staying active is one of the most effective ways to manage joint pain. Regular exercise, stretching, and physical therapy can reduce pain and improve movement.
- Over-the-counter pain relievers like nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may help some people, but are not always effective.
- If pain is severe, switching to a different aromatase inhibitor or to another type of hormone therapy (like tamoxifen) may be considered. About 40% of people who switch can tolerate the new medicine better.
- Other options that may help include acupuncture, yoga, and, in some cases, medicines like duloxetine (a type of antidepressant that can help with pain).
- Eating a healthy diet and maintaining a healthy weight may also help reduce symptoms.

### Why is it important to keep taking aromatase inhibitors?

Even though joint pain can be difficult, staying on aromatase inhibitor therapy is important because it lowers the risk of breast cancer coming back. If pain is making it hard to continue, talk to your healthcare team about ways to manage symptoms or adjust your treatment plan.

## **When Should You Call Your Healthcare Team?**

**If you experience any of the following symptoms, call your healthcare team:**

- If joint pain is severe or not improving with simple measures
- If you notice swelling, redness, or warmth in a joint
- If you are thinking about stopping your medicine
- Your healthcare team can help find the best way to manage your symptoms and keep you on track with your cancer treatment.