

# Bisphosphonates

Bisphosphonates are a group of drugs that can be used by men with prostate cancer that has spread to the bones (advanced prostate cancer). Partners and family members may also find this information helpful. Prostate cancer that has spread to the bones is not the same as bone cancer, which starts in the bones. This fact sheet describes how bisphosphonates work and possible side effects. Each hospital will do things slightly differently so use this fact sheet as a general guide and ask your specialist team for more details about the care you will receive. You can also call our confidential Helpline on 0800 074 8383.

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## Why might I need to take bisphosphonates?

You may be offered bisphosphonates if your prostate cancer has spread to the bones (advanced prostate cancer) and is no longer responding to hormone therapy. If your prostate cancer has spread to the bones, the cancer may cause damage to the bones. This may result in bone pain. Bisphosphonates are used help to relieve bone pain. They do not treat the cancer itself.

Bisphosphonates can also help prevent a condition called hypercalcaemia where the amount of calcium in your blood increases. Calcium is usually stored in the bones but in some cancers too much may be released into the blood. This is rare in men with prostate cancer. Symptoms of hypercalcaemia include thirst, drowsiness and sickness.

If your cancer has spread to your bones, you may be at a higher risk of broken bones (fractures) because the cancer can weaken the bones. Bisphosphonates may help to prevent and slow down the rate of damage to the bone. However, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines do not recommend that bisphosphonates are used in this way. This is because there is not enough evidence to show that they are effective in helping to prevent broken bones in men with prostate cancer.

Bisphosphonates for relieving bone pain are not widely available in Scotland, although they may be available in some areas. If you live in Scotland, speak to your specialist team about your options for treating bone pain.

There are trials looking at using bisphosphonates in men with prostate cancer. You can read more about taking part in a clinical trial in our Tool Kit fact sheet, **A guide to prostate cancer clinical trials**. You can find details of trials for prostate cancer treatments on the CancerHelp website (see page 7 for details).

Your specialist team can give you more information about how bisphosphonates may benefit you.



## Treatment

Zoledronic acid and pamidronate are usually given as an infusion into a vein every three to four weeks. An infusion involves passing a fluid containing the drug through a fine tube called a cannula (drip) into a vein in your arm. Treatment takes about 15 minutes. You will need to go to the hospital for each treatment.

Other bisphosphonates, such as clodronate, may be given as tablets, so you will not have to make regular trips to the hospital. If you are taking tablets, you should take them on an empty stomach with plenty of water, and wait at least an hour before eating. This is to allow the drug to be properly absorbed by the body. Read the information leaflet that comes with your medication for more information about this.

## What happens afterwards?

If you are taking bisphosphonates to help relieve pain, you can take them for as long as they are working for you. There may be some side effects from these drugs but your specialist team will discuss these with you before you begin your treatment.

## What are the side effects?

Side effects will vary from person to person. They will also depend on which drug you are taking. The most common side effects are listed below. You may not get all or any of these. The side effects of bisphosphonates are usually mild. Your cancer may also cause symptoms even if you are not taking bisphosphonates.

Common side effects may include:

- An increase in bone pain when you first take the drugs
- Flu-like symptoms such as joint, bone and muscle ache, headache, tiredness and raised temperature. These symptoms are generally mild and usually last up to 24 hours after treatment. Tell your doctor if you have any of these symptoms. Taking paracetamol can help to relieve them.
- Feeling or being sick (nausea and vomiting) or loss of appetite

- A drop in the level of red blood cells (anaemia) – this may make you look pale and feel weak
- Rash and itching
- Eye irritation (conjunctivitis)
- Changes in how well your kidneys work. These changes are not usually serious, and are not permanent. Your specialist team may do regular blood tests to check your kidneys.

Many of these side effects only last a few days. Your doctor or specialist nurse will be able to give you medicine to relieve the symptoms if necessary. Pain-relieving drugs can help with bone pain until it calms down.

Less common side effects include:

- Lowered levels of calcium and other minerals in your body such as potassium and magnesium. Your doctor will do regular blood tests to check these. You may need to take calcium and vitamin D supplements.
- Irritation of the oesophagus (the tube which food passes down when you swallow) causing inflammation and ulcers. Tell your specialist team if you have any problems swallowing, pain or heartburn.
- Risk of heart problems. One recent study has found that bisphosphonates may slightly increase the risk of heart problems including a fast and irregular heartbeat and stroke. However, more research is needed to show clearly whether this is a side effect of bisphosphonates.

There is also a rare condition called osteonecrosis of the jaw that can develop if you take bisphosphonates.

It is more common in men who receive bisphosphonates as an infusion than those who take them in a tablet. The healthy bone underneath the teeth dies because of a poor blood supply to this area. This seems to happen more commonly in people who have had a lot dental treatment. If possible you should not have any invasive dental work such as tooth extractions or jaw surgery if you are using these drugs.

Having routine cleaning or fillings should not cause a problem. If you need any further dental work your specialist may need to stop the bisphosphonate treatment before this is done. Treatment can continue once the dental work is finished.

Tell your specialist team if you have any loose teeth, gum problems (pain, swelling, infections) and numbness or a heavy feeling in the jaw. Good oral hygiene is also important. Let your dentist know that you are receiving bisphosphonates. Your specialist may give you a letter for your dentist explaining your treatment. It may be a good idea to visit your dentist before starting bisphosphonate treatment to get any existing dental problems sorted out, and to have regular dental check ups during treatment.

### **Reporting unusual side effects: The Yellow Card Scheme**

If you think you are experiencing a side effect from your medication that is not mentioned in the information leaflet that comes with it, then you can report it using the Yellow Card Scheme. This is run by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). They will investigate and if they find a problem with a medication then the MHRA will take action to protect the public. There are three ways you can report a side effect:

- Use the online Yellow Card form at [www.yellowcard.gov.uk](http://www.yellowcard.gov.uk)
- Ask your pharmacist for a Yellow Card form
- Call the Yellow Card freephone on 0808 100 3352

## **Where can I get support?**

As well as getting medical help to treat your pain, most men find it helps to get some emotional support. Feeling more in control of your emotions can help you feel better.

Close friends and relatives often say that it can be difficult to watch a loved one in pain. They can feel helpless and have trouble coping so they may also need emotional and practical support.

If you are feeling low or anxious, it may be useful to talk to a counsellor. Counselling may help you cope if you are experiencing pain. You may be able to get a referral to a counsellor through your specialist team or GP.

You may find it helpful to speak to someone with personal experience of pain caused by prostate cancer. Our support volunteers are all personally affected by prostate cancer and are trained to listen and offer support over the telephone. Call our confidential Helpline on 0800 074 8383 and ask to be put in touch with a support volunteer. There are also prostate cancer support groups throughout the country where you and your family can meet other people affected by prostate cancer. You can find details of your nearest group on our website at [www.prostate-cancer.org.uk](http://www.prostate-cancer.org.uk) or ask your specialist team.

If you have access to the internet, you can join our online community on our website. This is for men with prostate cancer and their families to share experiences, information and support.

You may also find that it helps to talk to your specialist team or a specialist cancer nurse such as a Macmillan or Marie Curie nurse. Many specialist nurses have counselling training and can help you work through some of your concerns. They also know a lot about cancer pain and how to manage it. Specialist nurses can also offer emotional support for you and your family. They work very closely with the district nurses and your GP. You can ask your GP or specialist team to refer you to these nursing services.

## Questions to ask your specialist team

- Would you recommend bisphosphonates for me?
- What are the main benefits of bisphosphonates?
- What are the main side effects of bisphosphonates?
- Who do I contact if I have side effects?
- Are there any trials of bone drugs which I can take part in at my own hospital or somewhere else?



## More information

### The Prostate Cancer Charity

This fact sheet is part of the Tool Kit. Call our Helpline on **0800 074 8383** or visit our website at [www.prostate-cancer.org.uk](http://www.prostate-cancer.org.uk) for more **Tool Kit** fact sheets, including an **A to Z of medical words** which explains some of the words and phrases used in this sheet.

### CancerHelp UK

[www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)  
Freephone: 0808 800 4040  
9am–5pm, Mon–Fri  
61 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PX  
CancerHelp is the patient information website of Cancer Research UK and provides information about current clinical trials for cancer.

### Carers UK

[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)  
Helpline: 0808 808 7777  
10-12am and 2-4pm, Wed and Thurs  
Provides information and advice for carers including signposting to support groups.

### Healthtalkonline

[www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org)  
Watch, listen to or read personal experiences of men with prostate cancer and other medical conditions.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)  
Freephone: 0808 808 00 00  
89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ  
Practical, emotional and financial support for people with cancer, family and friends. Information about cancer, its treatment and living with cancer.

### Maggie's Cancer Caring Centres

[www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)  
General enquiries: 0300 123 1801  
Cancer information and support centres located in several towns and cities around the UK. Provide information and support services for people affected by cancer.

### Pain Concern

[www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk)  
Helpline: 0844 499 4676  
10am–4pm, Mon–Fri  
1 Civic Square, Tranent EH33 1LH  
Offers information and support for people with pain and those who care for them.

### UK Prostate Link

[www.prostate-link.org.uk](http://www.prostate-link.org.uk)  
This website guides you to reliable sources of prostate cancer information.

The Prostate Cancer Charity makes every effort to make sure that its services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts about prostate cancer. We hope that these will add to the medical advice you have had and will help you to make any decisions you may face. Please contact your doctor if you are worried about any medical issues.

The Prostate Cancer Charity funds research into the causes of, and treatments for, prostate cancer. We also provide support and information to anyone concerned about prostate cancer. We rely on charitable donations to continue this work. If you would like to make a donation, please call us on 020 8222 7666.

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### Tell us what you think

We hope you have found this information useful. If you have any comments or suggestions about any of our publications, you can email [literature@prostate-cancer.org.uk](mailto:literature@prostate-cancer.org.uk) or write to The Information team at The Prostate Cancer Charity, 100 Cambridge Grove, London W6 0LE

References to sources of information used in the production of this fact sheet are available on our website.

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